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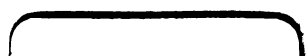
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LOVE AND HONOUR



LOVE AND HONOUR

BY
M. E. CARR
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"You know courage is reckoned the greatest of all virtues; because, unless a man has that virtue, he has no security for preserving any other."—
BOSWELL'S *Life of Johnson*.

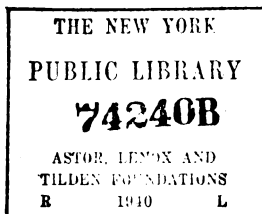
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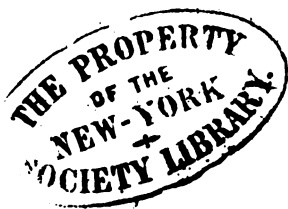
J.E.

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The Knickerbocker Press, New York

To
A. S.
WITHOUT WHOSE AID
THIS STORY
COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WRITTEN
IT IS GRATEFULLY DEDICATED
BY
THE AUTHOR

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LOVE AND HONOUR

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CHAPTER I

A DINNER-PARTY IN CASSEL

“ DOES this prolonged interview of Ostenburg with His Majesty mean more than friendship with the Prussian Court? — that is what I want to know,” said Monsieur de Norvins, looking round the table at his guests, of whom the greater part, both French and Germans, were officers or officials of the newly made Westphalian kingdom. “ You, Hammerstein,” turning to his neighbour on the right, “ have you no idea?”

The Freiherr von Hammerstein shrugged his shoulders.

“ What did he say to you about it?” he asked.

“ Nothing. A note was brought to me half an hour before dinner — three lines begging me not to wait as the King had unexpectedly summoned him to a private audience.”

“ Well,” said Hammerstein, with a laugh, “ if you, the General Secretary of State, know so little, what can you expect of a poor *chef d’escadron* like myself?”

Norvins turned to another officer, a fair, good-looking man who wore the uniform of the Bodyguard.

"You know him well, Pustau," he urged. "What is your opinion?"

"It's an open secret that the King would give his eyes to have Ostenburg as his aide-de-camp," put in a dapper young Frenchman before the German could reply.

"The question is not whether His Majesty wants him, Monsieur de Brisserat," said Hammerstein, "but whether Ostenburg will leave the Prussian service for that of Westphalia."

"*Morbleu!* There's surely little choice!" exclaimed Norvins. "Friedrich Wilhelm or Napoleon! And Ostenburg's a man of talents."

"He might have scruples," suggested Pustau, gravely. The talk seemed not altogether to his liking.

"Not Heinz von Ostenburg!" cried Brisserat. "He's not a patriot! Paris might claim him equally with Cassel. He has this of the German, this of the Frenchman, this of the Italian — a *Weltbürger*, as you say."

"Have you no idea, Pustau?" pursued Norvins.

"None, Baron. Ostenburg has never mentioned the matter to me."

"He's a strange fellow," said Brisserat, toying absently with the stem of his champagne glass. "But I'll wager a thousand francs he stays! His home so near Cassel — all his interests here; maybe," lowering his voice and glancing at a young lieutenant of the Guards farther down the table, "a deeper interest! One guesses—that lad's sister."

Pustau caught his breath, then gave a little laugh that rang rather false.

"There's surely no doubt about that," said Norvins, carelessly. "He admires her, and she is not

likely to refuse him — to the despair of a few hundred less happy men! For my part, I wish he would stay. One could not choose a better comrade than Heinz von Ostenburg."

A grizzled officer who had been deep in conversation caught the name and looked up.

"Is that the Baron d' Ostenburg, Colonel in the Prussian cavalry?" he asked.

"The same, *mon Général*," replied Norvins. "Do you know him?"

"We met as foes at Friedland and as friends during the negotiations for peace. What is he doing here?"

"He is on leave. His estates lie only a few miles from Cassel, and it is rumoured that he may return for good — not being afflicted with the ardent patriotism of Monsieur de Stein."

"If you knew him at Friedland, Monsieur le Général," broke in eagerly Fritz von Barby, the lieutenant of the Guards, "you heard of his exploit there!"

"I saw it, *mon fils*."

"Tell us what you saw," begged the lad.

He was the mouthpiece for the room. Everyone paused to listen, for General Duclos, despite his ill-cut face, his undistinguished figure, was a man of note over half Europe—a soldier whose rough and ready daring gave him a right to speak authoritatively of brave deeds. His eyes flashed generously as he spoke in answer to the young lieutenant:

"What I saw, *mon fils*? I saw a man gallop into the mêlée from the Prussian general's side. His head had been bared by a shot, and his face was glowing, with a smile on the lips—the smile of a man who was happy with the sound of battle in his ears. I saw his sword flash as he hit right and left, saw him reach the

hillock where an isolated detachment stood hard-pressed by our men, and lead them back under a hail of lead. He was wounded in the shoulder, and a stream of blood ran down to the neck of his white charger. It was a fine bit of courage; even our soldiers applauded."

"How splendid!" cried Fritz, enthusiastically, his clear eyes glowing. "What a man he is! And so modest! He never spoke of it!"

Hammerstein looked at the lad kindly.

"If you're half as brilliant a soldier as Ostenburg, Fritz," he said, "your king will have no need for shame on your behalf."

"And yet," mused Norvins, "you hardly know the man. You talk to him for a long while—you are charmed, delighted—but you find, in the end, that he has not lifted the veil from his real self. He's a contradictory fellow! As proud of his noble blood as Lucifer, and not disposed to abate one tittle of the regard due to it; but at the same time a mocker at royalty and tradition."

"That's a mere pose," threw in Hammerstein. "An aristocrat playing at democracy, I should call him!"

"You think so? I'm not so sure; though it's true he never takes things quite seriously, and laughs at himself as well as at the rest of the world. What gifts the man has! What eloquence! When he's in the mood he will persuade you that black is white."

"And yet I've known him to keep silence for an hour together," said Brisserat.

"That's sheer laziness," said Pustau—"because he knows his power."

"And as to women," continued Norvins.

"And as to women," interrupted Brisserat, with a

laugh, "there's not one but would be ready to fall in love with him at a moment's notice."

"They say he's had innumerable flirtations," observed Norvins."

"He has, at least, never lost his head in them," said Brisserat. "If I judge rightly, his brain is stronger than his heart."

"If that's true now, it was not always so, Monsieur," put in Hammerstein. "There was some affair years ago in Paris, before the Revolution—some girl to whom he was betrothed. She was guillotined in the Terror, and, though he never spoke of her, one could see how he felt it. He changed from a boy to a man in a few months. He has probably forgotten now, but he had a heart once."

"Another contradiction," said Brisserat, lightly. "We shall never get to the end—to the man himself! I wonder——"

The sudden interruption of his speech as the door opened proclaimed the entrance of its subject.

The newcomer seemed in no wise disconcerted by the lateness of his arrival. He greeted Norvins with a quick, graceful apology, saluted his friends at the table with a bow and a wave of the fingers, then, seeing the General, who had sprung up with Gallic impetuosity, hastened to his side of the table and shook him warmly by the hand.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure!" he exclaimed, speaking in a French so perfect that only some slight inflections betrayed its acquisition as a foreign tongue. "I had no idea you were in Cassel."

"Nor I that you were here, Colonel. I only arrived this morning."

Ostenburg took the vacant seat at Duclos's side. In

some inexplicable way the company, brilliant as it was, had shrunk into insignificance since his entrance ; men who before had seemed handsome looked commonplace ; the eye of a stranger would have been arrested by his tall, slight figure, would have been so charmed by the peculiar attraction of his personality that it would not have cared to glance away for long. And yet, looking closer, the face was not precisely handsome, though it had great fascination and was difficult, once seen, to forget. The grey eyes were set deeply under thick brows, the nose was straight with finely cut nostrils, the chin well-moulded, the mouth curled scornfully and lined at the corners. There were lines, too, about the eyes, and the whole expression in repose was rather disdainful, though sometimes, as now, a rarely brilliant smile lit it almost to beauty. But even smiling the face was hard to read, and one grew curious to know what lay behind it.

" I hear you met Monsieur le Général at Friedland," said Norvins. " I am glad you should renew your acquaintance at my table."

" I 'll wager the General has not told you the occasion of our meeting."

" Not of your meeting," said Hammerstein ; " but he has told us how he first saw Heinz von Ostenburg riding bareheaded through the enemy."

The Freiherr interrupted.

" That 's an old story," he said ; " a mere nothing—but it remains for me to tell you something as honourable to General Duclos's heart as his great reputation is to his head. I owe him, Messieurs, an eternal debt of gratitude—if one's life is anything to be grateful for !"

" But I must protest, Monsieur !" broke in the

General, laughing. "These gentlemen will think the merest fortune of war an act of heroism, if they judge from your interpretation."

"These gentlemen shall decide when they have heard, General. Listen, Messieurs! It was my misfortune to fight against the Emperor in the campaign of last summer. I was wounded towards the end of the day at Friedland, and, as I lay between two fires unable to move, General Duclos passed me. Despite my Prussian uniform, and at great risk of his own life, he raised me and carried me to safety. Not content with this, he bound up my wounds, shared with me his scanty rations, his shelter, and, best of all, gave me his company for the night. I never spent a merrier evening, and it is true that I positively regretted the exchange of prisoners which forced me to return to my regiment next morning. Happily we were enabled to renew our acquaintance during the negotiations for peace. You see what cause I have for gratitude!"

The gentlemen murmured admiration and approval. Ostenburg had a fine way of telling a tale, with his musical voice, and his half-French gestures. Just now, too, the glow of a noble sentiment animated his face and softened its disdain.

Duclos shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"But, Monsieur — you make, as I said, too much of a simple act of humanity. You would have done the same had I been in a like plight! Moreover the rations of which you speak consisted merely of three stale eggs and a flask of sour milk. Not much to be grateful for!"

"You forget that stale eggs and sour milk were a greater luxury at Friedland than Monsieur de Norvins's champagne and turbot here in Cassel."

"In any case, was I not amply repaid by the pleasure of your friendship? Gentlemen, let me tell you that you have never known Monsieur d' Ostenburg as a good comrade, unless you have bivouacked with him, wounded, on a battlefield. Such meetings are the salt of war."

"Do you remember how we played *écarté*, General?"

"With a blood-stained pack of cards! They came out of your pocket. Why, Freiherr, you never had your revenge! We put it off to a more fitting opportunity, because your wound grew too painful."

"What more fitting opportunity than now?" put in Brisserat. "We will all be witnesses."

"A good idea!" said the host. "You shall play when dessert is on the table."

"I am ready," said Ostenburg.

"And I!" echoed the General. "Perhaps the luck will have changed. That night I won everything."

The dinner proceeded. Conversation flowed as freely as Norvins's superb wine; tales of war were told, gossip of every capital in Europe. The General talked volubly in his racy, Provençal way, and Ostenburg listened, half amused, half critical. He liked Duclos, and, more important perhaps for him, found him entertaining. The man's blunt humour attracted his overcultured mind by its freshness, its vigour. Pustau, the cloud lifted from his brow, laughed his frank, merry laugh. The lad Fritz, promoted to manhood with his commission, sat open-eyed, finding that grown-up people could be as inconsequently merry as boys upon occasion.

Presently the table was cleared for dessert. Pipes were lit, glasses filled, and the servants left the room. Norvins sent for cards, and the company broke into

two groups : the one backing Ostenburg, the other Duclos. The German was noted as a fine player, and he gained a larger number of supporters than his opponent.

"I think you're wrong," he said, as they cut, to Hammerstein who had staked a large sum on his success. "Monsieur le Général has overwhelming luck. At Friedland he drew all the trumps to his hand, marked the king every deal, and won vole after vole. The devil sat behind his cards ! My deal, General !"

"Console yourself, Heinz," said Pustau. "Unlucky in cards, lucky in love, they say !"

Ostenburg shrugged his shoulders.

"A poor exchange ! What woman is worth a good game ? General, a strange coincidence : again hearts are trumps. I mark the king !"

The play began, and Ostenburg won the vole. In the next hand Duclos had the advantage ; but the Freiherr passed him and won the game with a full score. The General threw down his cards good-humouredly, and handed his stake to Heinz.

"First I won all from you, now you win all from me," he said ; "and each time hearts were trumps. My luck has gone to-day."

"Remember the proverb !" laughed Brisserat.

"What matter for me ? I'm an old married man !"

"All men do not consider marriage the end," said Heinz carelessly, lighting his pipe.

Duclos's eyes blazed, and he started from his seat.

"Monsieur, do you mean to insult my wife ?" he cried.

The younger man looked up in surprise.

"*Mon Général*, how could you think it ? I spoke carelessly, in jest. Even the gossip of Paris can only

tell us that Madame Duclos is as good as she is charming. Forgive me ! I drink this wine to her in token of my worship and esteem." He lifted his glass and rose. " Gentlemen, Madame Duclos ! "

The toast was applauded, and Duclos's brow cleared. He was as quick to pardon as fiery to take offence.

" Thank you," he said. " I shall hope to have the pleasure of presenting you to my wife very soon. She arrived with me in Cassel this morning."

" That 's good news in two ways," said Hammerstein ; " it means that you intend to stay here."

" King Jerome has been pleased to give me the command of a regiment of the line. The appointment is an easy one. On the whole I prefer active service ; but the acceptance of it gives me the possibility of being with my wife, from whom I have been only too long separated. You, Monsieur von Ostenburg, have also had an audience with the King. Is there a hope that you may return to Cassel ? "

There was an instant's pause ; no other man in the room would have dared to ask such a question, and all listened with wonder for the answer. It came quietly, but in a tone that forbade another word :

" His Majesty did me the honour to ask my opinion on the new uniform of his *Garde-Jäger*. Kings have really no consideration in the trifles for which they keep one from one's friends. Norvins, this Moselle is excellent ! "

" Superb ! " cried the General, not to be baffled. " And in it I will drink a toast without which no gathering of Frenchmen and their allies is complete. My friends, I say, '*Vive l'Empereur !*' You don't refuse that toast, Ostenburg ? "

" Not I ! " cried Ostenburg ; and, swinging his glass

A Dinner-Party in Cassel 11

high, he echoed "*Vive l'Empereur!*" But, as he touched it with his lips he met Pustau's eyes which had suddenly grown grave and questioning. He answered them with a half-mocking smile. In the enthusiasm of the toast no one else observed that dissentient note, for Pustau drank with the rest, though in silence.

General Duclos was on a favourite topic.

"The greatest general on earth since Alexander or Cæsar!" he cried. "I was with him at Toulon, I was with him at Friedland, and an hundred fights between! Where is there such another leader of men?"

"Where, indeed?" said Heinz. "A mere lieutenant of artillery fifteen years ago, and now — the ruler of half Europe. What an argument against feudalism! Sixteen quarterings don't give genius, and perhaps they weaken the blood! Fate has led me to fight against Napoleon, not for him, but I admire him not less than any Frenchman of you all."

"Well said, Ostenburg!" cried Brisserat. "And now, Messieurs, having drunk to the greatest man in the world, let us drink to the loveliest woman in Cassel!"

"Who's she?" asked the General.

"The question shows the lateness of your arrival, Monsieur. She is Fritz's sister, Fräulein Veronika von Barby, at whose feet we all kneel."

In the buzz of conversation that rose after the toast, Hammerstein bent over to Ostenburg, and whispered:

"We know you have an interest in drinking that toast. May I wish you joy?"

Heinz lifted his eyebrows.

"You ask me a thing which I, of all men, am least able to answer," he replied lightly.

Pustau caught the whisper, and drew a quick breath as of pain.

No one was in haste to go, and the party broke up late. As they went out together into the frosty December night, with laughter and farewell greetings echoing along the street, Heinz von Ostenburg laid his hand on Pustau's shoulder.

"Come back with me to the 'König von Preussen,' Egon; I have not seen you for an age," he said.

CHAPTER II

SHOWS THAT DIVERGENCE OF OPINION CANNOT SHAKE FRIENDSHIP

A MAN of any individuality cannot inhabit a room for a month—a week, even—without impressing something of his own character upon it, and in a lengthened stay Ostenburg's apartments had lost the impersonal air peculiar to the most luxurious of inns. A few books—inseparable companions to such a man, —guns and a pair of foils in the corner, an inlaid pistol on the wall, a table littered with papers, a pair of fine silver candlesticks, a bronze Mercury near the stove, a picture of the French school leaned against a chair, the smell of tobacco-smoke : all these things seemed to give a clue to the identity of their owner. A fire glowed in the stove and made the room seem doubly comfortable after the cold without ; a dark-liveried servant waited to attend his master. He smiled with genuine pleasure when he saw Egon, and hastened to relieve him of his heavy furs.

" I hope you 're well, Veit," said Egon, pleasantly.

" Thank you, Herr Graf ; never better. And you, Herr ? It 's a long while since I 've seen you."

" When a king enters his capital officers of the Guard have little time for visiting, Veit," said Heinz, unbuckling his sword and throwing it down on the couch with a clatter.

Egon looked round the room.

"That bronze in the corner is new, Heinz," he said.

The Freiherr glanced at it with the satisfaction of a connoisseur.

"I picked it up in an old shop near the market the other day. Look at the poise, the modelling!—it's a fine thing. I love that Mercury. I have a replica at home, but I could n't resist this. An extravagance, perhaps!"

"You're a lucky fellow to be able to satisfy your whims!"

"Lucky, am I?" He shrugged his shoulders and spread his long, slender hands to the fire.

"Most certainly! And the picture—what's that?"

"A daub in the manner of Watteau. Quite valueless! I bought it for sentimental reasons. Come, don't wander round like an unquiet spirit; sit down by the fire! It's good to have a little rest—you and I together, Egon, and Veit to make up the trio of old times."

The servant glowed. He was one of those faithful beings who give a lifelong devotion and never presume on the friendship accorded them in return.

"Good old times, Herr Freiherr," he said—"when we were boys and went fishing and shooting together! I should say, you and Graf Egon, and I attended you."

Pustau stretched his long legs in a chair and sighed.

"You're right, Veit. They were good times. I think there was n't a hole or corner of the country that we did n't know, riding and shooting over it. You were a better shot than I, Heinz."

"That was so," agreed Veit. "But you, Graf Egon, were the better at throwing a fly, and had more patience in fishing."

Opinion Cannot Shake Friendship 15

"Though less at your books," said Ostenburg, lighting his pipe.

"I never disputed your supremacy in learning! Witness the bookshelf yonder. My tutor could never flog knowledge into me! How I loved to escape and run the country! You played the truant, too; but somehow you managed to keep pace with the requirements of your teacher between whiles."

"I think Veit was the worst scamp of the three," said Ostenburg, "despite the year or two's advantage which was supposed to keep us out of mischief!"

Veit chuckled.

"Boys will be boys, Herr Freiherr!"

"Never was a truer saying, and we proved it to the hilt. But it was a long while ago, Egon. Do you ever think of that? We're growing old!"

Pustau laughed.

"We've a few years before us yet! I'm only thirty-four—and you?"

"Thirty-seven! Always three years to the bad."

There was a little pause. Then Veit, fearful lest he should intrude, asked what more the Herr Freiherr required. Ostenburg woke from his reverie to reply:

"Nothing to-night. You can go to bed when you like. — An invaluable servant," he continued, when Veit had noiselessly left the room. "I could n't live without him. He's never obtrusive, yet always on the spot—and faithful to the death! An Ostenburg is half divine in his eyes."

"Good old Veit!" said Egon. "I remember——"

He rambled on to some boyish reminiscence dear to them both, indifferent, foolish, perhaps, to the world at large; sitting before that warm fire, with the smoke of their pipes curling peacefully upwards, it was pleasant

to recall the past—a past in which the beginning of their friendship was misty and remote. The estates of their families lay side by side, and the two boys' intimacy had been, as it were, the continuance of a neighbourly intercourse which had become almost traditional in the country. Until Ostenburg was eighteen they had been inseparable ; then, as befitted the only son and heir, he had been sent on the Grand Tour, while Pustau, the youngest of a much poorer family, entered the Hessian Bodyguard.

Despite the separations of later years the old friendship had been maintained, and people remarked curiously that two men, seemingly as far asunder as the poles in every respect of taste and character, found immense pleasure in each other's society. Heinz, reserved to the world at large, took no trouble to veil his real self from Egon, who, simpler and more boyish, almost worshipped his brilliant friend. Egon was one of those people who are loved rather than admired : candid, loyal souls, with frank courage and a pleasant word for everyone. An hour's talk made one know him from head to foot, and knowing, trust him implicitly. Heinz was of a different temper, and even while yielding to the charm of his manner, one grew puzzled and half afraid. What was the soul that lay behind that indolent, satirical glance ? Might one trust that rare, illuminating smile ? Strange, indeed, that the men were friends ! And yet sometimes such ill-assorted friendships will prove the most enduring, their apparent incongruity concealing some bond as deep as life itself, and showing that the friends have stuff in them that looks beyond the external.

Heinz and Egon talked idly, disconnectedly, as is the privilege of intimate converse.

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"Strange, your meeting with the General," said Egon, presently knocking the ashes from his pipe.

"He seems a good sort of man."

"Yes. One whose roughness belies the gentleman he is at heart."

"And what luck he's had! Risen from the ranks to an important command; a favourite with the Emperor, with his comrades, with his men; sure of a Marshal's bâton some day; the husband of the most fascinating woman in Paris, Brisserat says."

"How he fired up in defence of her honour! There the *roturier* came out. He might have known that a gentleman would not even infer such an insult! But I liked him for it all the same. I wonder if his confidence is justified!"

"They say so. Brisserat was talking of it the other day. A good many men have lost their heads and hearts in her salon—Brisserat was among the number, I fancy,—but at the first word she freezes up, becomes the great lady she is—for Duclos married above his rank; Madame is of the ancient *noblesse*. I think they met in some romantic manner during the Revolution; but Brisserat was called away and never finished the story."

"A beautiful woman with a romantic history! Hearts in Cassel must beware! I wonder how many she will break, and whether she's as beautiful as Fräulein von Barby."

Egon's fingers tightened on the arm of his chair as he answered, with a somewhat studied indifference:

"Do you think that is possible?"

"I suppose possible, though not probable. Veronika von Barby is magnificent! How we all drank to her!"

"Enthusiasm in a better cause than the toast Duclos

proposed! Heinz, why did you speak of Napoleon so? He is the enemy of the king you serve!"

"You're wrong, old fellow; the ally. And a king not worth that!" He snapped his fingers. "Bah! why should one not admire whom one would. You drank the toast unwillingly enough, my friend; but you're his subject, his soldier."

"Only from sheer necessity, Heinz. I was forced to serve or be penniless. Ever since I yielded—since my brother yielded—I have cursed the day. Can I see our country, our Germany, trampled by a foreign conqueror, and be content? If it were not for my oath of allegiance to King Jerome Napoleon, I'd leave the flag. I was overruled at the first. I hate the French, I hate their Emperor, I hate the Westphalian king!"

Heinz smiled.

"What vehemence!" he mocked. Then more gravely: "You're right, Egon, and your standpoint is perhaps the higher. But you and I see things with different eyes. You are stronger, truer than I."

He rose and paced the room restlessly. Then burst out again with a sort of impatience:

"You have the fire, the blindness, to love a cause. I look through and know the vanity of every cause. Can I judge who is right, who wrong? Can I know why the place of our birth should be more sacred than the land to which our soul is akin? France has her rights as well as Germany; the one seems to me as sacred as the other. You accept the usual conception of duty bravely and blindly, like the loyal fellow you are; I am neither loyal nor true to an ideal which—no, Egon, I don't despise it!—I have lost. I would pray, did I believe in prayer, to have it restored unshattered, and that will tell you how far I am from

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contempt of it! But even for me there are some things left. I know when a great man appears, and I can admire his strength, his power. I value the individual, wherever he may have been born. I am a soldier of fortune; I would sooner serve a person than a cause. Patriotism is out of fashion. If I could have chosen the date of my birth, it would have been the fifteenth century; the life of a Sforza would have been worth living!"

Ostenburg's eyes flashed: the desire for power, the power of his own personality, was strong upon him.

"I confess that I'm ambitious," he said. "I should like to be a great man myself. Not merely by birth—by genius."

Egon sighed.

"Yes; we look at things very differently, Heinz. You are cleverer than I, old fellow; but sometimes I am glad of my stupidity."

Heinz laid his hand on his friend's shoulder with an impulse of affection.

"Not that, not that," he said, and his careless voice had suddenly a tone of tenderness and profound regret. "Not that; but loyalty and peace. And Heaven help us poor souls who have the spirit of denial in our hearts!"

There was a pause; then Heinz asked, abruptly:

"You know that I probably send in my papers on my return to Berlin?"

"You have spoken of it."

"For one thing, my mother wishes me to be near home—at least for a time. She finds the management of the estates too great a burden. For another——"

"I guessed that," said Egon, quickly, bending down to knock the ashes from his pipe. "You said nothing,

but my eyes were sharp enough. You would not wish to leave your betrothed—your wife.”

“ She has n’t accepted me yet.”

In his heart Egon thought, “ What woman could refuse him ? ”

“ Suppose that on my return here,” continued the Freiherr, slowly, “ suppose that I were to enter the service of King Jerome — were, in fact, to become his aide-de-camp. Would you think it wrong ? ”

Egon started.

“ Perhaps not — for you. It is treason to your country, to your present master ; but you deny a country. Yet I should be sorry, Heinz, because your disloyalty is more a mood than reality, and this would make it a fact. Has the King offered you the appointment ? ”

“ He has. Unofficially, of course.”

“ And you have accepted ? ”

“ No ; I am uncertain what to do. I shall ask my mother’s advice.”

“ The Frau Freifrau will advise you to refuse. Heinz, don’t do it ! It seems to me not perfectly honourable.”

“ For me it is — not for you. You don’t call Hammerstein, and Dörnberg, and all the rest dishonourable ? ”

“ Dörnberg did it against his better judgment. And the agreement of many does not make a thing right.”

“ Not by your standard, though it does in the eyes of the world. But very probably I shall refuse—most probably, perhaps. If I marry Fräulein von Barby, she may have wishes which would influence me ; she ’s a woman of brain, of judgment. I may take service

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in Austria, or in the King of England's German legion. I'm a British subject for one of my estates."

"That is what I mean to do, as soon as possible." Egon drew out his watch. "What, so late! I must go! Good-night, Heinz."

"So soon!—it's only just past midnight. Well, if you must! Egon, I value your opinion. Don't think too hardly of me if I do what you disapprove."

Egon took his hands and looked gravely into his face.

"If you leave it in the hands of Fräulein von Barby, old fellow," he said, "I shall be satisfied. Luck go with your wooing! She's worthy of you, and you are worthy of her! Good-night, Heinz."

They shook hands and parted.

CHAPTER III

THE HISTORY OF A MINIATURE

WHEN he was alone Ostenburg went to his writing-table and, sitting down before it, took an opened letter from a drawer. It was folded with precision, and addressed in a hand firm and exquisitely neat—a woman's hand one would guess from its delicacy, a man's from its firmness. The seal, too, had been pressed on the wax so clearly as to show every detail of the many-quartered coat-of-arms in perfect relief. Ostenburg unfolded the letter and read it through, according particular attention to a passage at the end:

And therefore, my dear son, I hope you will follow my wishes. It is your duty to marry, both as head of the house of Ostenburg, and as the last representative of my own not less ancient family of Graumoden—the name of which, indeed, I should be glad for your children to bear, conjointly with yours. When I was in Cassel last month I observed Fräulein von Barby carefully, and she seemed to me in every respect the wife I should choose for you; she is young, beautiful, and of birth as noble as your own. Indeed, I find on looking among our papers that in the fifteenth century our families were allied by marriage. Her lack of fortune is happily of no moment to you. You tell me that you admire and esteem her; it needed small penetration to note that your attentions did not displease either the mother or the daughter—as indeed, how should they? The match is a brilliant one for her.

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Romantic love is not necessary to the most happy marriage, and you are no longer a boy. A memory of your early youth should not prevent the birth of a new affection built up on the more solid ground of mutual liking and respect. I hope that your next letter will announce your betrothal, or, better still, that you will announce it in person on your way to Berlin. Naturally, I should not wish to bias the choice of the Freiherr von Ostenburg; but, as your mother, I think I may advise, and assure you that your wife shall receive from me a mother's blessing.

Heinz put down the letter and mused.

"Yes," he said slowly; "my mind is made up! To-morrow I shall speak to Frau von Barby and at the ball I shall have an opportunity of making my proposal to Veronika. She's beautiful, who could not admire her? She's good as she is beautiful—simple, proud,—a wife such as any man would dream of. I am ready to kiss the ground she treads on, and to thank Heaven that such women are permitted to live on this earth—but I don't love her. I have never loved a woman, except——"

He stopped abruptly, drew a key from an inner pocket and unlocked a little inlaid box that stood on the table. From it he took a miniature set in pearls, the miniature of a young girl with hair curled and powdered after the fashion of seventeen years before. Her eyebrows were long and finely pencilled, her dark eyes laughed out of the frame half-tenderly, half-mischievously, her nose and mouth were delicately cut, her complexion like the shading of a briar-rose. The Freiherr's eyes softened and grew tender as he looked, a sigh escaped him, and quickly, as if half ashamed of the impulse, he touched the miniature with his lips. There was a memory locked far away in his boyhood to which this portrait was the key. He never spoke

of it now, and none, save perhaps Egon, guessed the power it still exercised over the heart of the cold, brilliant man of the world to whom many women would have given their love had he asked it. But this memory was a shrine, a sanctuary, the possession of which ennobled the man and saved him from growing wholly careless or cynical.

Nearly eighteen years before the Freiherr von Ostenburg, having completed the Grand Tour under the care of a tutor, had been sent to Paris to receive the final polish of the French Court. He became the guest of a distant cousin, the Marquis de Sainte-Élisaire, whose only daughter, Anaïs, had just left her convent school to be presented in society. Perhaps the Marquis in putting his Hôtel at the disposal of his young kinsman had a suspicion of what was likely to occur. France was in an uncertain state, and it might be well for his daughter to be set beyond the reach of troubles by marriage in a foreign country. Moreover the young German was of great wealth and of suitable position.

On Ostenburg's arrival at the Hôtel Sainte-Élisaire in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, he waited for the Marquis in a salon furnished with the most exquisite taste of the eighteenth century. Mirrors framed in white scroll-work alternated with panels of salmon-pink brocade and painted groups of shepherds and shepherdesses upon the walls ; the chairs were slender-legged and upholstered in the same brocade; the carpet was of blended pink and green strewn with garlands of roses ; the ornaments were delicate and fantastic. Ostenburg, accustomed to the robuster adornment of his ancestral dwelling, found the whole almost too dainty for use, though inexpressibly delightful, and he looked round with curiosity and surprise. Presently,

however, he grew impatient, glanced at the enamelled clock on the chimneypiece and fell to re-adjusting his cravat and ruffles for lack of better employment. He was just beginning to swear at the Marquis under his breath when soft music struck upon the air. He turned eagerly, for his nation's love of melody was deep-rooted in his heart, and became aware of a half-opened door at the farther end of the room. Through this door the sound floated: it was that of a harpsichord delicately touched, and the notes were shaped into one of those airy dances which fascinate the mind like the measured courtesies of a minuet. With an uncontrollable impulse Heinz crossed the room so that he might see through the opening of the door.

The picture which greeted his eyes seemed the very embodiment of the music with which his ears were entranced. The player was a young girl seated before an instrument of satin-wood with painted garlands, and turned so that he could not see her face. But the curve of her cheek and throat against the white-panelled wall, the poise of her head with its powdered hair piled high beneath a morning cap of lace, assured him that she was very beautiful. Over the keys her slender fingers danced as if the very spirit of melody were in their tips, making the soft ruffles at her elbows quiver against her bare arms and float back gracefully. Her dress was of that simplicity which is more exquisite, more distinguished than mere elaboration.

A moment later the Marquis entered the room, full of dignified apologies for his delay, and soon, but not soon enough for Ostenburg's impatience, led him into the boudoir and presented him to Mademoiselle de Sainte-Élisaire who, at the sound of voices, had left her harpsichord and was occupied with some embroi-

dery. There was the little thrill as he touched her fingers with his lips, there were a few words, a compliment or two, a glance of the eyes, and by the evening Heinz was head-over-ears in love with his charming cousin. It was harder to guess the sentiments of Mademoiselle, but at least she did not seem to dislike the Freiherr Heinz von Ostenburg.

Their intimacy quickly ripened from "Monsieur" and "Mademoiselle" to "*mon cousin*," and "*ma cousine*,"—and once or twice, in the dusk, to "Heinz" and "Anaïs." Madame la Marquise, who was a disciple of Rousseau and liberal in her notions, smiled indulgently, and was not too severe a chaperon. "It is an idyll!" she exclaimed to her friends over the card-table. "They might be in Arcadia." Monsieur le Marquis also put no obstacle in the way, and so the two young things played the harpsichord together, read poetry together under the indulgent eye of Madame la Marquise, walked their first minuet at Versailles together, and, when winter came, skated together on the frozen lake, heedless of gathering storms on the horizon of France and indeed of everything else except each other's society.

Presently Heinz requested an interview with Monsieur le Marquis who was a trifle shocked to find that an explanation with Anaïs had preceded it, but gave his consent to a betrothal which now only awaited the approval of Ostenburg's parents for its ratification. "Figure to yourself, Madame," said the Marquis, when, having dismissed Heinz, he sought the honour of a *tête-à-tête* with his wife, "figure to yourself that he has made the declaration to our daughter before addressing me—as if they were a pair of peasants! So much for your education *à la Rousseau*! It was in

other fashion that our *fiançailles* were celebrated, Madame ! ”

The Marquise gave a little sigh.

“ Possibly, Monsieur. But, perhaps, had we made love à l'*allemande* our marriage might have been more ideal.”

“ Could that be possible, Madame ? ” said the Marquis, politely, as he took his leave.

Three days later Heinz von Ostenburg left Paris, with the inevitable sadness of parting softened by Anaïs's last kiss on his lips and the thought that before a year, before six months, were over he would return to claim her as his wife. This was in the spring of 1790.

He returned home to receive a full consent to his betrothal from his father, who clung to the kindred of a beloved French mother now that declining health and the sure approach of death brought her image before his mind. The Freifrau could make no valid objection to a thing which her husband so entirely approved, but the marriage was distasteful to her inborn German prejudice, and Heinz was quick to know it, even though she said little.

A few months passed ; letters were exchanged, letters that he read again and again ; Anaïs, in reply to his entreaty, sent a miniature, and asked for his. Several things delayed his return to Paris : his entry into the Hessian Bodyguard, at the Freifrau's earnest desire ; his father's illness, and business consequently devolving upon him. Then, just as he was prepared to start, the Freiherr died — suddenly at the last, — and there was no thought of departure for two or three months. The affairs of several large estates had to be knit up, the formalities of succession arranged, last

wishes of the dead man with regard to old servants and the like carried out. Before Heinz could again decide the date of his journey, the spring of 1792 had set between France and Germany a burning brand of war.

Communication became difficult and uncertain ; letters written were never received ; the news that reached Germany grew more and more alarming — arrests, an armed mob, a revolution rising to its height of terror and blind fury. In May Heinz had received a long-delayed epistle from Anaïs, in which she begged him to be patient and have no fear ; after that there was silence. He waited a month, two months, in deference to his mother's entreaties ; then broke through them, obtained leave from his colonel, and set out for Paris with Veit, who had accompanied him on his former sojourn in France, and upon whose discretion and fidelity he could rely.

The journey was long and perilous, but, thanks to his perfect French, he was able to conceal his nationality and to proceed on his way. His heart sank as he realised the disordered state of the land. It was worse than he had imagined, this Revolution — more cruel, more pitiless ! At two days' journey from Paris he was overwhelmed by the news of the September massacres. Almost mad with apprehension he hastened on, hardly caring for his life if Anaïs were dead, yet hoping against hope for her safety. On September 8th he passed the barriers, dressed as a Jacobin, with a red cap on his head and the tricolour that he loathed upon his breast.

He went to the Faubourg Saint-Germain ; the Hôtel Sainte-Élisaire was empty and pillaged, and, for one awful moment, he believed that his fears were fulfilled,

and Anaïs — his tender, delicate Anaïs — had perished at the hands of the mob. The relief that came an instant later seemed like happiness, though it only substituted uncertainty for irrevocable loss. By chance a man who had been in the Marquis's service, and was now making his living as best he could by running errands, saw and recognised him as he lingered despairingly before the Hôtel. This man accosted him and told him of the Marquis's arrest two days before, since the massacres.

"And Madame?" gasped Heinz, seizing the man by the arm.

"Arrested on the same day, *citoyen*."

"Mademoiselle?" — the word stuck in his throat.

"Alas, *citoyen*! she also."

Heinz reeled against the wall; but there was a ray of hope.

"What prison?" he asked.

"La Force, *citoyen*."

"What was the pretext?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "They are aristocrats," he said.

Heinz muttered a curse between his clenched teeth. A moment too late to save them! — it was horrible. And yet, had he been there, what could he have done? — suffered with her, that was all! But, at least, it would have been better than this. Still, he might do something. He steadied his horror-stricken brain with an effort, bade the man follow him to his lodging, and questioned him intently as they went. From that moment he never rested in his search. The Sainte-Élisaires were no longer at La Force, that much he discovered; but it was impossible to find whither they had been removed. Once or twice he barely

escaped arrest himself, and indeed it was only care for Anaïs that made him value his own safety. He lived in a nightmare, shuddering at every sight and sound of horror with the added misery of imagination, which forced him to picture his beloved enduring torture worse than death from the brutality of her warders. Every day he went to watch the tumbrils pass ; every day he read the list of victims, procured from a gaoler whose friendship he had bribed. At last, one day in January, a week after the murder of the King, the end came. The list of those to be guillotined bore the names of the Marquis de Sainte-Élisaire, his wife and daughter. Heinz steeled himself, and dry-eyed went out to see the tumbrils pass; to die with her, if it were possible—at least to see her once more. He had overrated his strength ; as the rumble of wheels drew nearer and the crowd swayed in ghastly expectation, his brained reeled and clouded, and Veit caught his master's lifeless form in his arms.

For weeks he lay in the clutches of brain fever, nursed untiringly by the devoted Veit, who hardly dared hope for his recovery. It came, however, at last ; his strong, young life was too vigorous to yield, and, before the spring, Veit was able to obtain passports and carry his master home.

But his mind healed less quickly than his body, and for a while it was almost unhinged with grief. What he had seen and what he had imagined rose up with agonising distinctness before his eyes ; he was prostrate, overcome. But little by little he recovered, the balance of his reason reasserting itself. He travelled, by new sights to efface the sight that was ever before his eyes ; and, at last, of all the horror there only remained the sweet, sad memory of the girl he had loved.

He was changed, indeed — changed from boy to man, as Hammerstein had said — but deep in his heart that love had never died ; he could look back on it calmly now, could gauge the years between, but the memory counted for much in his life, and was firmly interwoven among the threads of his complex nature. Maybe, too, that his coldness, the edge of satire on his tongue, were but the marks upon him of a glance into the very pit of agony. Egon, at least, thought so : the only man who knew enough to hazard a judgment.

Heinz looked at the miniature for a long while, then he touched it again with his lips and laid it back in the box with a sigh. There were letters also enclosed with it ; he took them out and read them as one reads a thing for the last time. The dawn was pale in the sky when he shut the lid upon them and turned the key. It was characteristic of the man that he laughed a little ironical laugh at himself as he did so.

“ After all,” he murmured, “ had I married Anaïs then, I should probably have settled down to a life no doubt idyllic, but uneventful. Wide experiences would not have been mine, nor curious adventures. I should have known far less of life than I do now. Little by little, too, she would have become an ordinary woman instead of the exquisite girl. Our love might have died, as love will do—we might have quarrelled in a vulgar, commonplace way, whereas now I have the sweetest memory that can fall to a man’s share; and such a memory, even if it be false, the mere idealisation of a boy’s dream, is a fine possession. And yet, and yet—” He broke off with a laugh that turned to a sigh, and, taking the candle, held it before the oil-painting on the chair. “ And yet I buy that daub,” he said ; “ I, who pride myself on being a

connoisseur, just because it hung in her room — it or its double. Folly ! Heinz von Ostenburg has no business to be sentimental, and to-morrow I ask Veronika von Barby to be my wife. She can't know everything, for I wronged you just now, Anaïs ! You would have never grown an ordinary woman—let me believe that, at least, whatever creeds I may fling to the winds !”

Yes ! He would have bartered the present willingly enough for that uneventful, idyllic life.

CHAPTER IV

TWO WOMEN

THE arrival of Ostenburg at the Court ball occasioned a stir of whispers and comments among the circle of ladies-in-waiting and aides-de-camp — a stir superbly disregarded by the Freiherr, who bent before the King and Queen with a deference in which Jerome, had vanity not dulled his penetration, might have read a touch of mockery — the mockery of a man who submits consciously to an inferior, and laughs in his sleeve the while. His reception was certainly gracious, for the King, wishing to gain an adherent, kept him in conversation for several minutes, and displayed for his benefit the full charm of new-learned royal condescension. When fresh arrivals claimed the King's regard, he was dismissed still more graciously, and, smiling rather ironically, he passed on to greet his friends among the courtiers. But even while he exchanged quip and compliment he kept his eyes on the door, for there was a set purpose in his mind — a purpose which touched him to unusual gravity, though he could act a part well enough to appear unconcerned.

At last, through the crowd, he caught sight of the face he expected ; a good many other people were expecting it too, and these hastened forward, eager to greet the beautiful Fräulein von Barby. Heinz, willing, perhaps, to cheat the gossip-mongers, made no

move, but appeared as deeply absorbed as before in the conversation of his neighbour, the Princess Maximiliane von Hohenzollern. He watched the girl, however, as she made her reverence to royalty in the wake of her chaperon, Frau von Wischenheim, and noticed with a fastidious satisfaction that, despite her simple dress, she outshone the acknowledged beauties of the Court by a kind of statuesque distinction. The Princess even paid her the compliment of an envious glance and a criticism on her great height. Heinz acknowledged the criticism politely, but reserved his private opinion, which was in favour of so tall a stature. Veronika had, in his eyes, a kind of regal splendour that dwarfed ordinary beauty to nothingness.

It was, perhaps, with a sense of conscious mastery that he let a circle of admirers cluster round the girl before he approached. When he did so he noticed with pleasure that her fine grey eyes lighted, and that she ignored the rest to receive his greeting, as if it were one she valued. He claimed her hand for the dance of which the music was already swinging through the air, and led her away, not altogether unaware that they were one of the most observed couples in the room. He had been a trifle out of humour when he came, for everyone seemed in conspiracy to laud Veronika ; even Veit, as he helped his master to dress, had murmured a tribute to her beauty, which told the Freiherr that he was aware of the probable event. But in the charm of her presence, under the spell of her whimsical tongue, he forgot all that, and gave himself up to the spirit of the scene he was to play.

The crowd at the foot of the dais made them pause, and, as they paused, someone behind them whispered, " That 's the beautiful Madame Duclos ! "

They both looked and saw the General making his way up the room with a lady on his arm. In the rapid glance Ostenburg gathered that she was a slender woman, perfectly dressed, and with an air of great distinction. He would have looked away again but at that instant she turned her head, and, across a gap in the throng of brilliant uniforms and toilets, met his eyes fully and with a strange expression in her own. For an instant only ; but the look puzzled him, even while he knew that it had been the merest chance. Veronika's impetuous exclamation, " Oh, she 's lovely ! Don't you think so, Freiherr ? " drew his eyes back to his partner's face.

" She 's not the most beautiful woman here to-night," he said smiling.

He spoke sincerely. Veronika was magnificent, with her red-gold hair knotted high and gleaming like copper in the candlelight, and with her clear eyes and the generous curves of her mouth. He admired her with the full approbation of his mind, as one might a noble picture or a statue.

She received his compliment with a surprised look and a little shrug of the shoulders. It would not have astonished her from anyone else, but she and Ostenburg had been on terms of intimacy that stood beyond compliment, though the way in which he talked to her — as he did to no other woman, — meeting her, as it were, upon an equality of mind, was in itself a fine compliment that she was quick to appreciate. He had read her with swift intuition : very young as yet, unbalanced and headstrong, a little reckless in what she said and did, she had, through it all, a nobility of soul that compelled his reverence in a manner not habitual to him. He judged her to be capable, under stress,

of heroism, of passionate self-sacrifice ; generous to a fault, tender to the weak and miserable as only very great and very noble persons can be. Her wit, too, met his own and defied it. He liked that, for young girls were apt to be afraid of him. Veronika knew not what such fear was, and she welcomed his friendship openly and warmly. It was, perhaps, only natural. Her life had been unusually quiet and secluded until a few months before, when, coming to Cassel with her mother to further Fritz's prospects, she had been introduced into a society which fell at her feet and worshipped the beauty that before had been accounted no such great thing. A girl of one-and-twenty might easily have been spoiled by so sudden a change : Veronika was not spoiled. She was, indeed, woman enough to like the admiration, but her quick brain looked down upon most of her adorers half-contemptuously and she was far more flattered by the calmer attentions of the Freiherr von Ostenburg. Very quickly they became friends, and friends so sincere that to crown friendship by marriage seemed to offer Heinz a prospect of very real happiness — as great a happiness as he could ever now expect.

What would she say to the question he was about to ask ? he mused, as they swung round to the measure of a waltz. A refusal he hardly anticipated, but how would she express her acceptance ? When they paused and he saw her eyes glistening with an almost child-like excitement, her breath coming quickly with the intoxication of the dance, it flashed upon him that it was sad, cruel even, to offer so splendid a creature a marriage which was, after all, only one of convenience — she deserved a man's whole-hearted love ! But there was another possibility : perhaps she felt for him more

than mere friendship, and then he was pledged in honour as well as by public opinion.

"What a delightful waltz, Freiherr!" she said, breaking in upon his thoughts. "How I enjoyed it!"

"And I!" he echoed. "Everything was perfect—partner, music——"

"I thought you scorned ordinary compliments," she mocked.

"Is any compliment ordinary when it comes from the heart, *gnädiges Fräulein*? If so, the poverty of human nature in creating new sensations must bear the blame."

"One can never take you at a disadvantage! But I want to talk to you seriously. I have to thank you for your generosity in giving me these lovely flowers." She touched her bouquet.

"You credit me with too fine sentiments. I was not generous—merely interested."

"Indeed!"

"I gave them to please you, and, in pleasing you, to gain something for myself—your gratitude."

"That is an involved way of saying a simple thing. But you do yourself injustice by inferring that you are selfish."

"Not I. I don't believe there's a generous action done in the world except when it advantages the doer."

He liked to say such bitter things that her indignation might flash out.

"A saying as false as it is sad!" she cried. "Why do you take so poor a view of human nature?"

"Alas, alas! experience, *mein Fräulein*!"

"At least you do yourself wrong and make people believe you cold and cynical; whereas we know——"

"You are mistaken."

"No, no. We know the help you gave my brother in procuring his lieutenancy in the Guards—your kindness to him."

"There I was as selfish as a man can be. The motive was the same as that which gave you your flowers."

Veronika shook her head.

"You are strange to-night, Herr Freiherr! I know you are thinking me a foolish girl, only fit to listen to pretty speeches; and I used to hope——"

He interrupted :

"It is you who do me injustice now! They've told you, perhaps, that I hold no very high opinion of women — that 's unjust, too! And of you — you with whom I talk almost as man to man, certainly as friend to friend."

She looked up, surprised at his sudden earnestness, and saw that the mocking light had died from his eyes. For once their glance disconcerted her.

"You must not talk like that, Freiherr," she murmured.

"Forgive me, I must," he said gently. "I have to ask you something very serious to-night — the most serious thing a man can ask a woman — and I want you to listen to me."

He paused and looked at her. It seemed that she had understood him, for her eyes were bent on the ground and her colour came and went. "Shall we go in here?" he continued, leading her towards a long conservatory which adjoined the ballroom. "We shall be alone."

They stood for a moment facing each other beneath the great palms and exotic plants; through the open door came the sound of music throbbing out on the heavily scented air. At last he moved

nearer to her, grave with the import of the moment to them both.

"It is a thing that concerns me very deeply," he said.

"I want you to honour me by becoming my wife."

Through the words shone an unconquerable pride.

"My wife!" — he spoke it as if he were offering the beautiful girl a kingdom. But she had her pride also and for an instant she was silent, quivering with a multitude of emotions that she could not define. She had pictured a proposal different from this, but she rose to the conception of the part she had to play, and, rather to Ostenburg's surprise, swept him a formal courtesy as she answered:

"Herr Freiherr, you honour me very greatly."

Her eyes flashed as she went on, with a touch of bitterness: "I had no idea — could not believe that you, with all your brilliant gifts, could have thought in that way of me."

"Could you doubt it?" he said, the more gently that her anger was very near to tears. "Could you not read my admiration, my regard? Fräulein Veronika, I am in no way worthy of you—that I know—in no way good enough to ask for your—your affection. But I have dared to do so, and I dare to beg for your answer."

She met his eyes steadfastly and knew that he spoke from the heart.

"Forgive me!" she said, holding out her hand with an impetuous movement. "This has come so suddenly that I hardly know what I say. And I'm sorry, too, for we have been friends, real friends, and I don't want to lose your friendship."

He took her hand and kissed it with deep respect, saying:

"But we can be friends still, if you will give me the answer I want."

She looked at him searchingly.

"But if I cannot?" she said. "And are you sure, Freiherr, that you do want that answer?"

He was surprised at a question which so nearly touched the truth, but met her with an equal frankness, saying :

"You doubt me, Fräulein? You think I am making a marriage of convenience?"

She bent her head.

"You wrong me there," he continued gently; "but I will be quite open with you, Veronika — let me call you by that name if we are really friends! I cannot offer you the first love of my heart, that love which a man can feel only once, because that was given long ago. Perhaps you have heard — such things become gossip — that in my boyhood I was betrothed to a French cousin. She died — in the Terror. I can never forget that — you are too generous to ask it — but I give to you all the esteem, all the admiration, all the affection of a very lonely life, and I will promise to do my utmost for your happiness if you put your fate in my hands. That is the whole truth."

Veronika bowed her head. She felt that he paid her a high compliment in making such a confession, but she knew what the confession implied: he did not love her.

"Thank you," she said at last. "I cannot answer you now. I must ask my mother's advice."

"She gave her consent to my proposal this morning. Veronika, you need only consider yourself — and me."

"It is for ourselves that I consider," she said, and paused.

The music still throbbed through the ballroom. Heinz looked back and saw the dancers with rustling dress and clanking spur, then turned to the girl at his side. Her hesitation spurred him to wish for that which he had regarded as a duty : even the Freiherr von Ostenburg might be proud to call such a woman wife! His life was very lonely; what might it be with such a friend at his side? He drew nearer, but she shrank back with a kind of pleading in her eyes.

"Give me time to think!" she begged. "It is a grave thing to decide so hastily. Give me time!"

"I do not wish to hurry your decision. You must know that whatever it be it cannot alter my regard, my esteem for you. I will wait as long as you wish."

"I shall not ask you to wait longer than to-morrow, Freiherr. The dance is over; will you take me back to Frau von Wischenheim?"

He again raised her hand to his lips, then offered her his arm and led her back through the crowded ballroom.

"Don't ask me for another dance to-night," she said hurriedly, as they approached the *daïs*. "We could not talk as we did before, and I do not wish to speak of—of this before to-morrow."

"I am at your orders, *gnädiges Fräulein*. Here 's Fritz; shall I leave you in his charge?"

She assented; the lad was about to lead her away when he caught hold of Ostenburg's arm, looking up to the *daïs* and whispering :

"Look! Have you seen her?"

"Whom?" asked Heinz, amused.

"Madame Duclos! I was presented to her! She 's divine, Ostenburg! The loveliest woman in the world!"

"You're enthusiastic, Fritz. Ah! I see the General is beckoning. *Gnädiges Fräulein*, excuse me."

He bowed low, met her eyes with a grave look of mutual understanding, and turned away.

A moment later he was presented to Madame Duclos by the General. Rising from his deep bow he looked at her critically, wondering if his fastidious judgment would agree with common report, but criticism was disarmed and he could only admire. She might have been two- or three-and-thirty; her figure was slight and not very tall, her head finely poised, with the soft brown hair caught up high to show the perfect curve of her neck, her complexion pale, with a delicate flush on the cheeks, her throat like ivory against the pearl-coloured satin of her dress, her eyes soft and dark like the petals of a violet after rain, with a strange haunting expression, sad in repose, though they could laugh merrily enough in response to the mood of those with whom she talked: long black lashes fringed them and fine dark eyebrows traced the curve of her forehead above; she was dressed with that perfection to which only a Frenchwoman can attain, and her pale-tinted bouquet shed a delicate fragrance about her.

"I have heard the whole story of your meeting with my husband at Friedland, Monsieur," she said.

Her voice was singularly musical, and, strangely enough, it struck Ostenburg's ear with a not altogether unfamiliar sound.

"A happy meeting for me," he said. "Will you honour me with your hand for this dance, Madame?"

She assented. The General moved away and the two remained on the dais talking until the music should begin. Heinz was charmed; he had rarely met so

fascinating a woman. Even into the commonplaces of a ballroom she threw something personal, something unusual, and he soon discovered that her wit was of no common sort ; but she disconcerted him once or twice by the strange way in which she looked at him as they talked — searchingly, as if there were in his face something that puzzled her. It was the same look that she had given him, apparently by chance, when she entered the ballroom with her husband.

Naturally enough they spoke of Paris. “ You have been there, Monsieur ? ” she asked, toying with her fan.

“ I first went to Paris eighteen years ago, Madame. There have been many changes since then.”

She sighed. “ Changes that make it seem like another life. Let me see, eighteen years ago—that was in '89, I suppose—before the Revolution. Versailles was still in its glory.”

“ Versailles was a paradise. But then I was only a boy, and to boys paradise comes easily.”

“ There were, without doubt, women in your paradise, Monsieur ? ” she laughed, glancing up at him quickly. His face had suddenly grown grave.

“ A woman, Madame.”

“ And then, also without doubt, there was disillusion and paradise shattered ! ”

“ For once in a way not disillusion, Madame. She — died.”

There was a pause; then Madame Duclos asked very gently :

“ And you have never been to Paris since ? ”

“ Once, Madame.”

She bent to readjust a bracelet as she asked : “ And when was that, Monsieur ? ”

His voice shook as he answered : " In the Terror ; in the autumn of 1792."

She looked up sharply and he saw that her face had suddenly grown white.

" You were there — in the Terror ? " she repeated.

" Forgive me, Madame ! " he cried impetuously. " That time has, no doubt, painful memories for you as for me ; I should not have recalled it."

" No, no, Monsieur ! I can bear to speak of it now. Many of those whom I loved perished on the guillotine ; tell me, Monsieur, was it there that the — the woman you loved died ? "

He hesitated but, looking into her face, he saw a strange, deep sympathy which forbade all resentment of the question.

" Ah, forgive me ! " she said, before he could answer.

" I—I hurt you. But indeed I did not speak from idle curiosity. We have been fellow-sufferers and so can feel for one another."

His hesitation passed. Those light fingers on his scar seemed to heal even as they wounded and, impelled by a strange impulse of confidence, he told her in brief, heartfelt phrases the tragedy of his life.

" And you have not forgotten altogether ? " Madame Duclos said at last.

" I lay no great store by human constancy, Madame," he replied ; " but perhaps everyone has a memory which is never lost. That is mine."

She was silent for a moment, then asked more lightly, touching her bouquet with dainty white fingers :

" Is your wife here to-night ? "

" I am not married," he said, surprised.

" No ? I was mistaken. I thought the General said you had been married since he met you. This

music is too good to lose, Monsieur. Shall we dance?"

He marvelled a little at her change of mood, but fell in with it readily. He was under a spell and the scent of her bouquet overcame him with a sort of intoxication. Never had a waltz seemed to him so delightful; her dancing was the very poetry of motion, and through it all the memory of the past rose more and more vividly before his mind, awakening him to a disquiet unknown for many years. He supposed it came from the presence of this highborn Frenchwoman, reviving for him the grace and charm of the Court of Versailles.

She gave him two or three other dances and his interest, his admiration, increased. How came it that she, so charming, so cultivated, should have married the rough-and-ready General, palpably her inferior by birth? What sufferings had given that depth to her eyes? What sad memories lay between the days of Versailles and the present? Above all, why was she so familiar to him? A sort of elusive recognition mocked him now and then: she would raise her hand to push back a tiny curl that escaped over her brow, she would throw back her small head half merrily, half defiantly, her fingers were restless, touching a jewel here, a ribbon there—why did not all these things reveal the mystery?

"Is it not possible that we might have met at Versailles, Madame?" he said politely, tentatively. "If I had heard your name I should not have forgotten it."

She shook her head with a little laugh, saying:

"If a man has only one uneffaceable memory, Monsieur, that would be among the thousand forgotten things."

Too well-bred to insist, he generalised, suggested

adroitly, hoping by indirect means to discover what direct ones could not fathom ; but his attacks were as adroitly parried and he found that he was telling more of himself than he was learning of her. Veronika was forgotten and his other partners seemed strangely insipid after Madame Duclos. Still the mystery eluded him; she teased him, baffled him, mocked him a little, he thought—and then, once or twice, there was a tremour in her voice, a silence. Only when she had left the ballroom did it flash upon him. She turned on the stair to bid him good-night—for he had accompanied her and the General to the door—and suddenly he knew who it was that she so strangely resembled, understood why the long ago had been so present. The General's deep voice sounded an instant later : “ How tired you look, Anaïs ! We have stayed too long.”

Ostenburg laid a hand on the balustrade to steady himself.

“ My God, it is n't possible ! ” he murmured ; “ it is n't possible ! ”

When the ball was over and the King and Queen had retired, Egon accompanied Ostenburg home.

“ Must I congratulate you ? ” he asked, as he bade him good night at the door of the “ König von Preussen.”

The Freiherr started; he had forgotten his proposal, forgotten everything but that mysterious, beautiful woman.

“ Congratulate me ? ” he stammered. “ Ah, no ; not yet. Fräulein von Barby has not given me a definite answer. Will you come in for a moment, Egon ? There's something I want to ask you, to show you.”

Pustau followed, wondering and a little uneasy.

Two or three of the younger men had whispered in his hearing that Ostenburg had started a new flirtation and it was strange that he had only danced once with Veronika. But one could not judge him like an ordinary man, and often where he felt the most he showed the least.

Ostenburg hastened to his bureau and unlocked the little box, taking from it the miniature.

"Do you see any likeness in this?" he asked as he put it into Egon's hand.

Egon held it under the lamp and looked at it carefully.

"It is much younger, of course," he said at last; "but it is very like Madame Duclos."

"You see it too!" exclaimed the Freiherr. His usually quiet face was lit up, excited, by some strange, turbulent emotion. "Yes, yes, and she knew me—of that I am sure!"

A light flashed upon Egon.

"You mean that this is the portrait of Mademoiselle de Sainte-Élisaire?"

Heinz assented.

"Then you mean——"

"That Madame Duclos is the woman I was betrothed to seventeen years ago! Egon, do you think it possible that she might have escaped?"

"Of course it's possible! But it may be merely a likeness—and now—in any case——"

He paused and looked Heinz full in the face. The Freiherr gave a little laugh.

"Oh, in any case, it makes no difference! She has, of course, forgotten our boy-and-girl love-affair—women always forget—and I, well, I'm pledged to another woman!"

Egon put both hands on his friend's shoulders.

"But you have not forgotten, Heinz," he said earnestly; "you must n't see her again, old fellow—promise me that!"

Ostenburg hesitated. Egon had spoken the truth. That boy-and-girl affair was set so deeply in his heart that all his later gallantries had, as it were, merely passed over the surface of it. At no time could he have heard that Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire was alive without emotion, and now that she, as he could not doubt, had returned to him a woman more attractive than any other, was it strange that he should desire to hear the whole story from her own lips? Yet until Veronika spoke her refusal he was bound to her by every rule of honour, and, careless though he was, he would never choose to be faithless to a girl whom he so revered. Could he trust himself to be faithful in the presence of Madame Duclos? He looked Egon full in the face and said:

"I promise that if Veronika accepts me I will not see Madame Duclos again. Does that satisfy you?"

CHAPTER V

OSTENBURG'S FREEDOM

FRAU VON BARBY was lying in bed with a troubled expression on her pale, gentle face. Veronika sat beside her, pale too, but firm in the decision she had made — a decision which cost her some pain, even while she knew it to be the right one. She understood her mother's regret, but would not yield to it — all the more because a marriage with Ostenburg was a greater one than their poverty could have hoped for. With the warm temperament of her soldier-father the girl had inherited a great pride and a force of will that overruled her gentler mother, who gave way to her too much, the gossips said, though indeed Veronika never failed in a reverence the more tender because of the knowledge of her own strength.

"And so you are quite sure, Veronika?" said the elder woman.

"Yes, Mother; quite sure now. When he spoke I did not know, and in the ballroom my mind seemed in a whirl, but this morning I know that he is not the man for me to marry."

She rose and went to the window. "Look!" she said, drawing back the curtain; "it's so cold and white that one's mind must be clear. I see quite plainly now the answer that I must give him."

"You have been very good friends ever since he came to Cassel."

" Friends, yes ! It is a pleasure to talk to him, because he is certainly quite different from ordinary men. I like him, even while much that he says hurts me. He is a finer nature than he would have one believe ! But, Mother dear, when you married my father he was more than a friend to you ! "

Frau von Barby glanced up at a portrait that hung on the wall above her bed. She had adored her husband, and her children had learned to look upon him as the ideal of everything great and noble, though he had died too far back in their childhood to be more than a vague memory even to Veronika.

" There are few men like your father, dear ! But Heinz von Ostenburg is a very charming man, and I don't think many girls would refuse to be his wife. "

" Perhaps not. It would be hard for a girl to refuse him if he made love to her !—He did not make love to me, " Veronika added in a lower voice, turning her eyes to the window.

The mother smiled.

" What would you have ? He asked you to marry him. "

" He asked me to be the Freifrau von Ostenburg, because we are friends, because I have some measure of good looks, and because I am of suitable position. He paid me a high compliment, but he does not love me. If he loved me—— "

She stopped abruptly. The Freiherr's admiration had dazzled her, and — though she was able to realise that, whatever his love might have awakened in her heart, all she now felt was the glamour of an attractive personality — to picture his love was to picture something very fine and worth the gaining.

" I will not persuade you, dear child, " said the

mother, regretfully. "You have always decided for yourself, and in this matter you must know best. I should have been glad to see you Freifrau von Ostenburg. We are poor, and such a marriage would have secured your future."

"I thought of that too," said the girl quickly, coming back to the bedside. "But I would never marry a man for his position or for his money, and you, dear Mother, would not wish me to do so!"

She knelt down and laid her hand on Frau von Barby's shoulder, in a sort of remorse that she must needs disappoint so tender an ambition. The mother drew her face down and kissed it, saying:

"You are right, Veronika!"

The girl stroked her mother's thin, delicate hand with one that was very firm and strong.

"He is coming this morning," she said at last. "I want to give him my answer myself."

"Perhaps he will think it strange that I do not see him," said Frau von Barby, anxiously.

"He will understand, *Mütterchen*; he knows you are not strong, and indeed it is best that I should tell him. We are friends, as you say, and I want him to understand that I do not mean to hurt him. Hark! I hear footsteps — it must be he!"

They listened for a moment.

"No, it's Fritz's step!" said Frau von Barby, guessing her son's approach with a mother's penetration. "He must know, Veronika."

The lad swung into the room, glowing from the cold air and merry as a spring breeze. It was pleasant to see the affection with which he bent to kiss his mother, the warmth of his morning greeting to Veronika.

"It was bitter on parade!" he cried, rubbing his

hands before the fire. "I almost wish I were a girl to stay in my warm bed late after a ball! Oh, Mother, I wish you could have seen Madame Duclos! But you will see her, sure enough, for she asked to know Veronika, and I think they will be great friends."

"She was very charming to me," said the girl; "but, Fritz——"

He interrupted.

"You must come and skate in the Augarten this afternoon, Veronika. Brisserat has lent me his sleigh, and it will do for you finely! Why do you look so grave? She has no cause, Mother, for we all know who was the most beautiful girl in the room last night! I was proud to own her my sister, and Ostenburg——"

"Fritz, we have something to tell you!" broke in Frau von Barby.

"About Ostenburg? Why, I know what that is! Little Sister, I congratulate you!" He went up to Veronika and would have kissed her, but she held him back, saying:

"There's no need for congratulations, Fritz; tell him, Mother."

"Last night Herr von Ostenburg asked Veronika to be his wife. She promised him his answer this morning, and she has decided to refuse him."

The boy opened his eyes in amazement, then took Veronika's hand affectionately.

"But no, you're joking," he said, with half-laughing reproach. "You won't make me believe that! To refuse Heinz von Ostenburg, the finest officer in Germany, the noblest man I know! You are teasing me, Veronika!"

"Fritz, dear, I'm speaking quite seriously. Mother

approves me. We thought it right that you should know of Herr von Ostenburg's proposal."

"But why, why? You were always so pleased to see him, always talked more to him than to the rest! And how he admires you! Why, it's sheer ingratitude! We owe him so much. My commission——"

"The more reason that I should not promise him what I cannot give him. I don't love him, Fritz. Perhaps you're too young to understand; but indeed I know best in this affair."

The boy shook his head.

"One can't move you when you are determined,—I know that, Veronika,—but I'm sorry. There's still time to change your mind."

She smiled. "No, there is n't time, Fritz! I hear the bell. Go and receive him, like a good boy. I will come when he is in the drawing-room."

"Shall I stay there?"

She hesitated, clasping and unclasping her hands nervously.

"Yes, stay, Fritz," she said at last. Perhaps she feared that to meet Heinz alone might have made firmness difficult.

She need not have feared. Ostenburg's face as he bent before her betrayed no ardour, no impatience, but only a very grave courtesy and a sort of questioning. Indeed the moment held for him a deeper import than Veronika knew; her answer meant freedom or bondage. Which did he desire most? In that moment he could hardly have said. Bondage to this superb woman would have seemed like safety from some vague danger.

"I am come to hear Fräulein von Barby's decision," he said quietly, seeing that she hesitated. He did not observe that the hand she had rested on the back of a

chair was tense and rigid ; she appeared to him calm and composed, and her very composure told him the decision she had reached.

“ I am fully aware of the honour of your proposal,” she said slowly, meeting his eyes without flinching, “ but I regret that I cannot accept it. I do not give you this answer hastily, Freiherr, and I believe it is the best for both of us.”

Into the Freiherr's eyes leaped an expression that Veronika could not fathom. Regret was mingled with relief, for, as he received freedom, he almost longed for the fetters that would have saved him from memory. He bowed, saying :

“ Against that answer there is no appeal. *Gnädiges Fräulein*, may I dare to hope that you will not altogether withdraw your friendship because I was bold enough to presume upon it ? ”

His calm acquiescence told her that she had chosen rightly.

“ I should be sorry if we were ever anything but friends, Freiherr,” she said. He must never guess that her decision had cost her any pain. “ But I think it would be best if we did not meet for a little while. Presently we shall forget this — this interruption,” — she smiled, — “ but just now it would be hard to be quite natural. You see that I speak frankly ; I cannot do otherwise.”

Fritz had remained a passive and wondering spectator of the scene. Now he broke in :

“ Ostenburg, I've tried to persuade her, but it's no use ! I wish she would have married you, and my mother wishes it, too. We understand the honour you have done our family, but Veronika won't be persuaded ! ”

Even Heinz could not forbear to smile at the lad's rueful face.

"Herr von Ostenburg quite well knows that I have nothing but esteem and regard for him, Fritz," said Veronika. "He will understand."

"Fully, *mein Fräulein*. I leave Cassel for Berlin to-morrow, but I shall hope, if I return at any time, to enjoy the friendship you are good enough to offer me. You will permit me to retire?"

She held out her hand, saying: "Good-bye, and thank you!"

He bent over it in silence and touched it with cold and impassive lips.

When the door had closed upon him and her brother Veronika sank down into a chair with a little sigh. She had acted wisely, but her wisdom had not been without cost. Ostenburg could not offer her the love her pride demanded, and yet she knew, without daring to acknowledge it to herself, that she had been very near giving him her heart.

Fritz's impulsive regret broke out as he accompanied his guest down-stairs.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry!" he said. "I never thought Veronika could be so foolish, and I should have liked to be your brother-in-law!"

Heinz laid his hand on the lad's shoulder.

"Sisters do not always consult their brothers in these matters," he said. "I am sure Fräulein Veronika knows best, and you and I will be very good friends all the same. Good-bye, Fritz. Thank you for your advocacy of my cause."

He grasped the boy's hand warmly and turned away with an irrepressible exultation in his heart. Regret gave way to relief as he turned in the direction of the

Königstrasse where the Duclos lived. "Free, free!" he murmured, then caught himself up: "Free from what? Free for what?" He dared not answer his own question. At least he was free to know whether Madame Duclos were Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire! The rest lay in the hand of Fate.

At a street corner he met Egon von Pustau.

"I'm loosed from my promise, old fellow," he said, when the latter turned to accompany him. "Fräulein von Barby has refused me!"

Egon stopped short. "Refused you?" he faltered.

"Irrevocably and decidedly. Evidently it is not written in the stars that I should wear matrimonial fetters!"

"Refused you! and you jest about it! I was so sure—so sure!"

"If I jest it is because I am bewildered, astonished. I was sure, too."

"Then she is free?"

Heinz looked at him in astonishment. "What do you mean? Of course she is free!" he said; then suddenly the light in Egon's eyes taught his own their blindness. "Good Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Why did I not know before? What a fool I have been! You love her yourself!"

Egon flushed and made no denial.

"And I—I was selfishly standing in your way, just because she was the wife my mother had chosen for me, and because I liked her! Can you ever forgive me, Egon?"

"There is nothing to forgive. You had so much to offer, and I—nothing. I wanted her to be happy and I was sure no woman could refuse you."

"Very probably it was for your sake. Go and win her, old fellow!"

"But how can I dare? She with her beauty and her cleverness might choose anyone. What am I? A penniless younger son, with no brain to speak of!"

"But the best heart in the world! Egon, I'm thankful she refused me. To gain a wife at the cost of your happiness—I'm spared that."

Pustau caught his friend's hand. His joy was too great for speech, and they walked on for a while in silence. Presently he looked up and saw that they were in the Königstrasse.

"Then you go?" he asked.

"I go to see Madame Duclos. I am free, too, Egon."

Pustau made as if to speak, then hesitated.

"Come, what is it?" said Heinz. "You have something to say!"

"You'll forgive my interference? You're free, Heinz; but remember that General Duclos is your friend, and that you owe him your life!"

"I will not forget! Besides, the past won't be anything to her. You need not fear."

Heinz waved his hand and turned away. Egon stood to watch him until he reached the Duclos's house and presently disappeared within. He had a vague presentiment of misfortune that clouded even the possibility of winning Veronika's love.

CHAPTER VI

“ MEN AND WOMEN OF THE WORLD ”

MADAME DUCLOS was alone in her boudoir. Before her stood a frame of embroidery, but she seemed too restless to work and the silks had fallen to the floor, a tangled heap of colour. Presently she rose and moved about the room, touching a flower, opening a book, playing a few notes on the painted piano which had been brought for her at great cost from Paris, but all with an air of preoccupation, as if she were awaiting someone or listening for something. She started once or twice when a knock sounded, then gave a little movement of impatience and went back to her embroidery-frame with the intent to work. But no sooner had she taken up the needle than the restless fit came upon her again ; she pushed the frame aside and went to the window, where she paused with a hand on the curtain and meditative eyes fixed on the street below. Presently her face lighted with a sudden radiance and she caught her breath.

“ He guessed after all ! ” she whispered. “ He ’s coming — in a minute he ’ll be here ! Oh, ought I to see him ? ”

She made a step towards the door, then paused irresolute as a knock echoed loudly through the house. “ After all, why not ? ” she murmured. “ Just once—where ’s the harm ? I can act the part that Jean’s wife must play, and he need not guess the rest ! ”

A man's tread on the stairs sent the blood to her cheeks and made her breath come quickly. A moment later the door was flung open and a servant announced: "The Herr Freiherr von Ostenburg!"

Heinz looked and, as he saw her standing there, almost girlish in her simple morning dress, all doubt left him. Careless of ceremony he hastened forward and, before she could resist, took both her hands in his with a low cry:

"Anaïs, Anaïs, how could I have been so blind last night?"

There was a moment's pause, then she drew her hands gently away.

"You must not speak like that, Monsieur," she faltered.

He collected himself and bowed low, saying:

"Forgive me, Madame! I forgot that things are not as they were."

She glanced at him with a smile that was more sad than merry.

"Yet you did not know me last night!"

"How could I guess? I thought you dead many years ago. Why did you not tell me? Why did you mystify me? It was a little cruel to play with my remembrance as you did, Madame!"

She looked at him strangely, saying in a low voice:

"Was it cruel, Monsieur? I thought you had forgotten—everything. I did not choose to remind you."

It had been, perhaps, the instinct of a coquette, pardonable under the circumstances, that had made her act as she did last night. She had chosen not to remind him, but she had chosen, too, that, should he ever discover her identity with Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire, he should at the same time know that the charm

of her first youth had gone only to give place to the still greater charm of a brilliant womanhood. It had been a dangerous game to play, and she read now in his eyes that she had succeeded too well. He had come with no very definite purpose, drawn by an irresistible fascination of which he had not sought to render account to himself, but in her presence it was useless to be blind to the truth ; he was in love with Madame Duclos as deeply as he had been in love with Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire in the years gone by. He longed to take her in his arms, forgetting all separation, all sorrow, and her words cut him.

" I told you, Madame, that there was one memory in my life ! " he cried. " After that, you might have known that I have forgotten—nothing. It is you who have forgotten, Madame ! "

She turned on him almost indignantly, oblivious of her part in the desire to justify herself in his eyes.

" I did not forget, Monsieur," she said. " If you knew all you would understand how I came to break the vow we swore so earnestly as children. There was no word, no sign from you. I thought *you* were dead, because I trusted that you had not forgotten ! "

The pain in her voice smote him to the heart.

" Forgive me ! " he cried penitently. " Indeed, I hardly know what to say ! "

There was another pause—a pause of embarrassment: it was so hard to be natural !

" Will you tell me how you were saved ? " he asked at last, very gently. " For the sake of old times I should be glad to hear. "

" If you wish it, Monsieur. "

She crossed to the chair by her embroidery-frame and sat down, then motioned to him to do the same.

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He obeyed mechanically, gazing still on her. Presently she raised her head and he saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

"Madame, I should not have asked it," he said quickly. "It is too painful for you to recall that awful time!"

"No, no!" she protested; "I wish you to hear. It is right that you should!"

She began to work as she spoke; it would keep her eyes from lying open to his, would cover the trembling of her fingers. The maid presently found the stitches in wild confusion.

"Monsieur, you heard of our arrest," Madame Duclos said, after another pause. "The cause was unknown to us: it was probably no more than the bearing of a proscribed title! We were dragged to La Force—my father, my mother, and I; then, for some unknown reason, to the Abbaye! Oh, it was horrible—crowded into a prison whence the only escape seemed the guillotine! Friends came and went with a smile on their lips and a jest to cover their pain; we pretended there was nothing to fear, because it did not become the *noblesse* of France to tremble before that *canaille*! There were children imprisoned with their parents, and the most cruel thing of all was to watch them playing, not knowing the horror that lay beyond. Our turn might come any day—oh, Monsieur, I looked into the eyes of death in those days!"

She paused and, wrung with grief and pity, he murmured:

"Poor child, poor child! And I was so near!"

"If I had known that!" she cried. "I need not tell you all the horror; you saw those brutal men—you heard the Marseillaise ringing down the streets."

"Don't think of that, Anaïs," he said. "Tell me how you were saved!"

"Four months passed," she went on. "Then I grew very ill with the privations and the captivity; I was delirious for some days and when I awoke my mother and father were gone—I had no need to ask whither. The pity of the gaoler's wife and the devotion of a lad who was imprisoned with us and who gave himself up voluntarily to complete the number for the day saved me; they did not care who it was that went to the guillotine, they had grown careless. Monsieur, it needs such a time as that to show the nobility of human hearts; I wept for that lad as I wept for my parents, who had grown closer and dearer to me in that terrible time. My father was, perhaps, not a good man, but at least he knew how to suffer."

Her voice broke and she covered her face with her hands; then spoke again low and hurriedly:

"I must be quick, or I shall never reach the end of my tale; but, indeed, Heinz, that time is branded on my soul. Well then, the gaoler's wife managed to convey me from the prison to her own house. She was a rough woman, degraded by the brutality of her surroundings, but good at heart. Friendless but for her I spent days, weeks, in her little home behind Notre-Dame, trying to repay her kindness by working at fine embroidery. My one thought was to journey to Germany, to my friends; but I was still weak, and I waited. At last I came to know a soldier, a captain in the Republican army, but a good man, and opposed with all his soul to the atrocities of the Terrorists. He had noticed me one day in the prison, and, knowing something of Citoyenne Cabot, he came to visit her; soon he penetrated my secret and offered me his

friendship and assistance. I accepted it willingly, for his face told me that I could trust him. I was not mistaken ; he was an honourable man, and no nobleman could have treated me with greater respect. After a few weeks, when I had grown to rely on him as my only support, he offered me marriage, diffidently, as knowing the difference in our birth which in happier days would have made such a thing impossible, but yet with the assurance of his own honesty and sincere affection—indeed to marry a noblewoman in those days was rather a danger than a distinction ! What was I to do, Monsieur ? I was helpless and alone ; my own people had died on the guillotine ; my friends were scattered ; those whom I held most dear stood on the other side of a fierce war — they might even be dead ! Jean Duclos was my only friend, and a friend so true, so tender, so respectful ! I was weak, and he offered me protection ; I was solitary, and he gave me a home and the shelter of his name. I yielded, Monsieur, to his entreaties, and the day after became his wife. Do you understand now ? ”

Heinz bent his head in assent and for a while there was silence so complete that one could hear every sound in the street and distinguish a church-bell ringing in the distance through the frosty air. He understood only too well ; the chivalrous chords that underlay the apparent carelessness of his mind had been touched. He was bound in honour to speak no word of his passionate love to this woman ; she had suffered, and another man had helped her ; she had been alone, and another man had rescued her, while he, who would so willingly have given his life to save her an instant's pain, had been set aside by the ironical decree of Fate. And to this other man, her husband, she was bound by

the deepest ties of gratitude ; he was not a rival to be despised or hated, but a good man who had stood by her in danger, in solitude, and moreover one who was Ostenburg's friend and the saviour of his life. Ostenburg was bound over to loyalty by a double tie, and he saw very clearly that Anaïs had come back from the grave only to be lost to him the more completely.

He rose and walked once or twice up and down the room, trying to compose his throbbing brain ; at last he paused near her embroidery-frame and laid a hand on it as he looked down at her.

" It seems that Fate has played her most ruthless game with us," he said, rather bitterly. " And perhaps the cruelest move in it is in our meeting now."

She forced a smile as she looked up at him.

" Surely not so cruel, Monsieur ! Strange enough, if you will — one of those surprises of which she is so fond ! But I am very glad we should meet again, glad to know that you are well and happy, and that your career has fulfilled the promise of your boyhood."

He saw her meaning, the meaning she wished him to see, and was silent. This meeting, save in its bringing to life the most awful experience a human being can endure, had evidently been less painful for her than for him, he thought. Without doubt she had learned to love the good General in whom were so many admirable qualities.

" May I ask you one question, Madame ? " he said, looking up.

" Yes, Monsieur."

" Are you happy ? "

She started and answered, rather coldly :

" Have you the right to ask that question ? "

He bent towards her, saying :

" I think so. Seventeen years ago your happiness was the chief thought of my life, and surely, now that Fate has taken the matter out of my hands, I need not consider myself presumptuous in asking if my desire had been accomplished."

" Perhaps you are right," she said slowly. " Yes, Monsieur, I am very happy. My husband is the best man in the world ; I have wealth, position, society—everything that a woman needs. You may rest assured that I am happy."

He could not disbelieve her ; but another question burned on his lips, a question that he dared not ask, that he had now no right to ask. She had everything that a woman needed—had she the greatest thing of all ? Did she love her husband ? He knew that once she had loved himself.

Her voice broke in upon his thoughts :

" Will you pardon me, Monsieur, if I ask you to leave me now ? You must understand that this—recollection of—of a painful time has distressed me, tired me a little. Forgive me, but you will see how it is !"

She held out her hand and he raised it to his lips, lingering over it an instant more than courtesy demanded. Anaïs sighed. She had played her part fairly well, she thought, considering what a hard one it had been. He was not very different, this lover of her girlhood ! She dared not think whether the key of her heart was still in his hands, or, if so, whether he might choose to use it. At least he should not guess that there was a chamber to open.

" And so good-bye, Monsieur," she said lightly, lest even at the last he should read her thought.

" For ever, Madame ?" he asked.

She gave a low laugh and spoke hastily, yet with a certain hesitation :

“ Why no, Monsieur ! Next time you come to Cassel I shall hope to see you—the General will wish to see you. You must count me among your friends ! After all, we men and women of the world do not think so deeply about a—a childish memory. Do we, Monsieur ? ”

He bowed low.

“ Madame has decided ! Yes, it is certainly well to forget some things, or else memory may become too importunate. Madame, *adieu !* or, as you permit me to say, *au revoir !* ”

Well to forget ! Yes, if one could ! When the door had closed on Ostenburg, Madame Duclos gave a deep sigh, and her eyes grew dim with tears. At that moment life seemed to her very bitter, but she had made her decision and it became a Sainte-Élisaire to be brave.

Heinz, as he went down the stairs, sighed too, the more sadly because her brave acting had deceived him. A childish memory—that was all it was to her, the thing that had been the purest inspiration of his life ! Next time he came to Cassel they would meet as friends ; she had chosen so, not guessing, he thought, how hard friendship must be to him. Next time he came to Cassel ! That might not be for many months—for a year, perhaps ! He could not endure separation for so long. After all, better her friendship than nothing ! Better endure her forgetfulness of the past than never see her at all ! And it lay in his power to be near her always, to meet her whenever he wished ; he might accept the King's offer and receive an appointment which would keep him continually in Cassel

and in close intercourse with all the French at the new Court. He had hesitated, had almost decided to refuse, moved by Egon's entreaties and knowing that many would look upon him as a turncoat—fearing, too, his mother's disapproval. But what was the opinion of the many, even of Egon or of his deeply-loved mother, weighed against a touch of Anaïs's hand, a word from her lips? Beautiful, accomplished, she had come back to him as the woman to whom his maturer years would have given their worship, even without that earlier love; there was no wrong in his seeing her, being near her, vowing himself to her service. She might forget if she chose—the initiative would lie with her; he would be true and honourable. And yet—was it possible? Could it be always “Madame Duclos” and “Monsieur von Ostenburg” between them? She, too, had trembled at their meeting; in her eyes, for a brief moment, he had read some hint of the secret she had played so cunningly to conceal. Whimsically the thought of that game of *écarté* with the General flashed across him. “First I won all from you, then you won all from me, and each time hearts were trumps,” had said Duclos, jesting. Was that game to be a parable of their life? The General had indeed won the thing he most prized—would he win it back? Ah, he was mad, mad! Thinking so, he must never come back to Cassel! Where was the chivalry that Anaïs's story had awakened in his heart?

All that day he was flung to and fro between such arguments. He wrote a letter accepting the appointment, then tore it up before it was sent. Had it been another woman than Anaïs he would hardly have hesitated: bred among the lax morals of that age's society he would have returned without a thought. But Anaïs



—the dream of his life, its highest inspiration, the bride of his boyhood—she must be sacred to him ! He knew well enough that to return was dangerous, but sophistry came to his aid, and he argued that he might surely be her friend, that she herself had given him the justification for what he wished to do. The point of view which would have shown it as dishonourable to weigh a consideration so purely personal against that of cause or country, was not likely to have occurred to one for whom the individual was everything, the cause nothing.

He wavered. He had yielded all his life to impulse, and now he was not strong enough to cut himself free, nor brave enough to seek safety in flight. Late that night he wrote again to the King, signifying his readiness to be at His Majesty's disposal so soon as he should have sent in his resignation as a Prussian officer. It was, perhaps, a sign that he mistrusted the honesty of his action that he did not speak of it to Egon when they parted. He told him, casually enough, that his surmise with regard to Madame Duclos had been right, and Egon's misgivings were set at rest by the light way in which he spoke of it—indeed, his mind was too full of Veronika to think much more about the matter. If he had, he would have judged his friend by himself, who, in a like case, would not for a woman's sake have returned to Cassel. Perhaps he was right to be thankful for his stupidity.

CHAPTER VII

DEALS WITH THE RELATION OF A MOTHER AND SON

THE Freifrau von Ostenburg was awaiting her son in the great drawing-room at Ostenburg. It was a bitter evening and a log fire blazed warmly on the open hearth, but its flickering light could hardly reach the farthest recesses of the vast room, made sombre by the dark hangings, ancient oil-paintings, and heavy, old-fashioned furniture which, in their stateliness, seemed a fit setting for the majestic figure of the Freifrau. She had been a beauty in her youth and her good looks were of the sort that age only enhances, though she scorned any artifices of dress and never wore anything but the severest black. To-day she had, indeed, pinned a lap-pet of costly lace on her thick white hair and draped a silken scarf over her upright shoulders ; but this was to please Heinz, in whose honour also the drawing-room had been warmed and lit, for the Freifrau usually sat in a smaller apartment. In this house his preferences were always scrupulously regarded ; he was the Freiherr whose wish must there be law, and the Freifrau, an autocrat in his absence, was careful to lay down every show of authority when he was at home. This, her only son, was the one thought, the one interest of her life, his visits the red-letter days of her calendar, and Heinz, on his part, repaid her love by the deepest affection and respect which a man could

feel. The mother and son were friends in no ordinary sense of the word.

She was listening for him now, none the less intently that her slender white hands did not cease for a moment from their spinning. It was one of her maxims that a deep affection should be undemonstrative. "Terms of endearment, embraces, every relaxation of the feelings—these are signs of low breeding," she would often say. "We of the nobility should know better how to preserve our dignity." The Freifrau herself was a perfect exponent of such a doctrine: she was a woman of stern, strong character—inclined to be narrow and hard, as such characters often are; her consciousness of the dignity of high birth was only tempered by her knowledge of the responsibilities attached to it; her prejudices were inflexible, her sense of honour lofty. The strain of French blood in her husband's family was a grief to her, for she thought the French a frivolous people, and she had striven to counteract it in her son by firing him with tales of Ostenburg and Graumoden valour. To her, Heinz owed his pride of birth, to that ineradicable Gallic kinship his mobility, his cynicism. In his boyhood she had been stern towards him, wishing him to be tough and hardy, for her love was of no blind, indulgent sort; and he had feared her, until one day, when he came home in expectation of punishment, having played truant, and with boyish daring followed a boar through the woods to its lair where he had attacked it with no help but that of Veit, his mother's eyes had shone with such a gleam of pleasure at his courage that at the instant there arose between them the fullest sympathy. Independent with other men, he acted upon her advice, shrewd and keen always; her

intellect he valued, her beauty he admired, to her judgment he bowed.

Presently to the Freifrau's quick ears a sound of wheels was audible in the distance; it came nearer, and at last, with a clatter of hoofs on the stones, a carriage drew up before the door. She raised her head and smiled, then pushed back the spinning-wheel and folded her mittened hands. It was fitting that her son should come to her, not that she should go out to meet him. He was in the room in a moment, bending over her hand with the formal courtesy that was usual between them while she touched his forehead with her lips. No greeting could have seemed more cold, or have been less so; these two understood each other perfectly. Heinz stayed only a moment in the room, just long enough to inquire for her well-being and to assure her of his own, then hurried off to change his travelling-dress in time for dinner. The Freifrau watched him go with a proud light in the eyes that were so like her son's. She was happy and content, well-assured too that he would be able to tell her the news she longed to hear—his betrothal to Veronika von Barby.

Impatience was, however, a feeling to be repressed, and though confidences had of necessity to be postponed, owing to the presence of the servants at dinner, she betrayed no desire to hear anything beyond the general subjects discussed during the first part of the meal. It was enough for her that Heinz was there with her in the stately dining-room, sitting in the carved chair of his forefathers, and served, as became him, on ancient silver and damask inwoven with the Ostenburg arms.

She asked him with interest about the new Court, with some scorn about the King and Queen, and their entry into Cassel.

"There was no great enthusiasm," he told her. "Indeed some of the workmen refused to wear the dark-blue-and-white cockade which was prescribed, and got into trouble with the police in consequence. Of course there was a show of rejoicing ! Jussow had designed the triumphal arch erected in the Friedrichsplatz—or, as we must call it now, the Ständeplatz—and the *Nobelgarde* had tried to give a French cut to their uniforms. Moreover, the illuminations were superb ; but these things did n't make up for the lack of loyalty in the people."

"And does the King take up residence at the old castle?"

"Yes ; when he is not at Napoleonshöhe."

"Napoleonshöhe?" queried the Freifrau.

"We must learn to give that name to Wilhelmshöhe, *Frau Mutter!*"

"A poor kingdom that depends for its prestige on changing ancient names!" she said disdainfully.

"And what of the King himself, my son?"

"A little man, vain of his person and the slave of any beautiful woman; not without talent, though, and, as I hear, brave. Westphalia might have had either a worse or a better ruler: but he's too much influenced by Le Camus, a Creole whom he met at sea some years ago and made his secretary—a man of some brain but no education."

"And the Queen?"

"A beautiful and amiable Princess, devoted to a husband who is faithless to her."

"She is, at least, a German of royal birth—for that we must be thankful. And what do you think of the Constitution, Heinz?"

He sketched it in a few words, showing her its

groundwork and its chief characteristics. She followed him intently, nodding when a thing pleased her.

"In many ways good," she commented, when he had finished. "But they forget that a Constitution cannot be made all at once. That of England, a model in such matters, has grown through many centuries. This is arbitrarily imposed on a kingdom as arbitrarily created from very different elements. Moreover, in putting the nobility on a level with the burghers they sap the very roots of society. I don't think their Constitution will work!"

She paused ; then turned abruptly from politics to private matters, asking after this old friend and that, and expressing surprise at the number of Germans who had accepted office under the new government. Heinz, his own decision in view, defended them ; then, feeling that the subject must be more fully discussed when they were alone, asked on his part news of the neighbours and of the estate. The Freifrau was a capital woman of business and in Ostenburg's frequent absences she ruled the tenants and the property far more severely than he would have done. It was among her maxims that a woman, of whatever rank she might be, should thoroughly understand the ordering of her household, and from the household to the estate there was but a step : the Freifrau was competent to deal with either.

In this way the time of dinner passed ; and when at dessert the servants withdrew, Frau von Ostenburg's lips were able to frame the question which seemed to her to be more important than the fate of kings or empires :

"And now, my son, tell me about Veronika von Barby !"

Heinz set down the glass of wine from which he was about to drink and looked across at his mother gravely, as if weighing how he should tell her unwelcome news.

"*Frau Mutter*, I followed your wishes," he began at last.

"That is well. When am I to receive my daughter-in-law?"

"Never; *Fräulein Veronika* refused me."

The old lady lifted her brows in amazement.

"Refused you? But no, it is impossible!" she cried.

"Indeed it is possible, Mother!"

"A mere girlish fancy, then; she will change her mind."

Heinz shook his head.

"*Veronika von Barby* is not the sort of woman to change her mind."

"But what were her reasons? A penniless girl to refuse the most brilliant match in Hesse!"

"My dear Mother, you persist in thinking far more of me than is just. *Fräulein von Barby* can choose among better men than I. Her reasons I do not know; but she told me, after due consideration, and very kindly, that she could never be my wife. We parted the best of friends."

"Her mother should have overruled her! The girl is headstrong and wilful—I saw that, but thought it not beyond cure by a firm husband. Admiration has spoiled her."

"Indeed you do her injustice, *Frau Mutter*; she is quite simple, quite natural, quite sincere, and clever enough not to be dazzled by homage, though she's too young not to enjoy it. *Frau von Barby* left her to judge for herself, because *Veronika* is fit to do so."

“ Frau von Barby is a weak, foolish woman ! Still, the loss is on their side ; the girl will hardly make a greater match. And then they have the boy to think of ! Veronika well married, his future would have been more secure. She will regret it when she has time to think ! ”

“ I don’t think she will ; to my mind her refusal speaks volumes in her favour. There are a great many women who would marry me just because I am a rich man and the bearer of an old name — Veronika is not one of these ! And do you know, Mother, I am really glad of her decision. I discovered afterwards that Egon loves her a thousand times more than I could ever have done. He is a better man than I ! ”

The mother’s pride denied it.

“ A good lad,” she said ; “ but their marriage would be that of hunger and thirst. Oh, the foolish girl ! ” — “ To refuse you for Egon ! ” was her thought.

“ Not so foolish, Mother ! He has every quality to win love ; that I caused him a moment’s pain is what I regret.”

The Freifrau sighed as she peeled an apple thoughtfully.

“ I regret the whole affair,” she said at last. “ It is right that you should marry ; it is your duty as head of the family ; and Veronika von Barby was suitable in every way. Moreover, you seemed to have none of the objections you urged when I suggested other young ladies.”

“ And I had none ; yet I am sorry rather for your sake than for mine. I fear now that my duty must go undone. And what does it matter ? My cousin Ludwig has four sons to secure the name.”

“ But not my name, Heinz ! You are the only de-

scendant of the Graumoden, who have possessed Graumoden for centuries! No, my son, the refusal of one foolish girl must not interfere with your duty. You will find someone else——”

“If I cared to seek! *Frau Mutter*, no! I have done my best, and I shall not marry now.”

“For my sake, Heinz! I am old and before I die I should be happy to hold your son in my arms.”

He looked across at her with regret on his face; but another woman stood between them—a woman for whose sake he must disappoint even his beloved mother.

“You must forgive me,” he said; “but I have made my decision. One of Ludwig’s sons will be a better Freiherr than I have been. I am not a man to marry. —Once, perhaps, I thought differently,” he added, with a sudden longing for sympathy, for guidance.

Her answer checked it.

“No, no; a Frenchwoman was not good enough for you,” she said incisively, rising from her seat.

He repressed a sigh as he went to open the door. Only once had his mother and he been at variance on a grave matter. She had never approved his betrothal to Anaïs and had been unfeignedly glad—cruelly glad, he sometimes felt—when the bond was broken.

In the drawing-room they were silent for a while. The Freifrau had taken her knitting; Heinz went to the window and looked out, pushing aside the heavy curtains. The full moon still touched the horizon and the trees of the avenue were etched upon it blackly; the sky was clear as a sapphire and the silver light, glancing on the frozen snow, gave a strange, mysterious radiance to those familiar objects—the terrace, the sun-dial, the high laurel bushes, the lake beyond. It

was a night so beautiful as to raise strange yearnings, longings for one knew not what. The Freiherr was in a mood upon which the merest trifle will play and, as he looked out, he forgot his mother, forgot everything but one face—a face that in some way seemed to satisfy the spirit of the moonlit scene. He had stood once to watch the moonrise with Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire at his side—what if Anaïs Duclos were beside him now? His thoughts passed beyond his control and wandered further than he would have chosen.

The Freifrau glanced at him from time to time, with pride at his tall, well-knit figure, with anxiety as to what should keep him so long silent. She feared that he might have been more in love with Veronika than he cared to acknowledge—feared it, both because she wished her son to be spared any pain, and because such pain would keep him from the marriage she considered so essential to happiness and duty. For her every romantic tendency was swallowed up by pride and a sense of what was fitting to rank. She carried the motto "*noblesse oblige*" sternly into every detail of life.

She spoke at last, calling Heinz by name. He started and came back towards her, in his eyes still the shadow and the glory of his dream.

"You are not a very cheerful companion," she said. "We are together for so short a time."

He sat down in the big chair opposite her and rested his chin in his hand.

"Forgive me, Mother," he said, with a smile to which no woman could have refused forgiveness. "Yes, I'm a dull fellow at best, as you ought to know by this time. But it will not be so very long, I hope, before I am here with you again."

She put down her knitting quickly, saying :

"Then you have decided?"

"Yes, I have decided to leave the Prussian service. You approve still, do you not?"

"It is not for a woman to approve or disapprove the actions of the Freiherr von Ostenburg!"

He laughed.

"But it is, *Frau Mutter*. Why, you're the best man in the family!"

The Freifrau smiled, well pleased at her son's compliment.

"I do approve, then, if I must give my opinion," she said. "In the Prussian service there is neither glory nor distinction to be won. Have you decided what to do afterwards? Will you join the army of Austria, or go to England?"

"I think neither of these, Mother. I have a fancy to come home."

"Home! To give up your career?"

"That I should be unwilling to do. Mother, should you think that I was acting dishonourably if I entered the service of the King of Westphalia?"

"The service of France? My son, have you quite decided?"

"So many things point to it," he said hurriedly, foreseeing her objections. "It seems that I might be of service to my country in advising the King. My influence might have weight. Then so many of my friends have rallied—there's Hammerstein, the Pustaus, Dörnberg,—all those we were talking of just now. I should be among my own people and near you so that I could take the management of the estates from your hands, and see you more often than I have been able to do lately."

He spoke persuasively, willing perhaps to convince

himself, as well as the Freifrau, of the rightness of his course — to set his return in the light of a duty rather than a yielding to impulse.

“ Yes, there are many things that make your decision advisable,” said the Freifrau, slowly weighing his words. “ Certainly you set the matter in a different light from that in which I had regarded it. And yet, it does not seem to me wholly fitting that an Ostenburg should serve a mere Corsican peasant.”

“ As to that, we must take the world as we find it. Men of birth equal to mine have submitted. Besides the Bonapartes are not peasants, but of a good Corsican family.”

“ At any rate not of rank as high as our own, and not of royal blood.”

“ Not that, perhaps. But, after all, Mother, we must learn to put away prejudices that have grown old-fashioned.”

“ Your democratic notions again!” cried the Freifrau with some impatience. “ Certain prejudices can never grow old-fashioned, because they are rooted in our very bone. Birth must always constitute the highest aristocracy.”

Heinz smiled and leaned back in his chair with joined finger-tips. In argument with his mother he always took the side of revolution, partly from conviction, partly from a desire to cross swords with her quick wit. Just now he had drawn back to the old ground of debate, that, in so doing, he might disarm any real disapproval on her part.

“ You forget that there is another aristocracy — the aristocracy of genius,” he said.

She drew herself up, and her fine eyes flashed beneath their thick brows.

"I do not forget that, my son. But you will find the greatest talent among men of the highest birth, who enjoy the fruit of centuries of culture."

"Talent, perhaps ; not always genius. No one can deny genius to him whom you called just now a Corsican peasant. I am willing to serve him because I hold it no disgrace to bend before the greatest man the world has ever seen, even though he be my inferior by birth."

"Does his greatness extend, then, to all his family ?" she flashed out.

Heinz laughed.

"You strike below my guard, Mother. I am not prepared to affirm that King Jerome is a great man ; perhaps he is the reverse. A puppet—no more ! But I shall serve the power of his brother through him, and maybe I shall help to save him from being a hurtful puppet."

"You know my prejudice against France, Heinz !"

"Why be prejudiced against any nation ? One is as good as another. Frenchmen are brave, witty, honourable ; Frenchwomen—adorable !"

He broke off with a little laugh to cover a sudden break in his voice. That keen spirit of his was mocking at his own hypocrisy, even while he half despised it. With a quick turn he changed the subject, and it was not mentioned again until the Freifrau rose to retire to bed.

"I would, perhaps, have chosen that you should serve against the enemies of your country," she said, when Heinz kissed her hand. "But you have been moved by strong and honourable reasons and your knowledge of the world must be a surer guide than my retirement."

"Then you 'll welcome me in the uniform of the 'Corsican peasant's' army?" he asked playfully, not daring to treat the matter with too much earnestness.

As she stepped past him through the door he held ceremoniously open, she laid her hand on his arm and pressed it gently—a rare caress for her.

"You know that my son is welcome in any dress, so long as he is an honourable gentleman and worthy of the name of Ostenburg," she said, pausing an instant to look into his eyes; then passed on, proud in every movement.

He had almost detained her, longing to open his heart, to beseech her sympathy in the sudden change that had come upon his life; but he remembered how she had failed him when the shadow of the guillotine fell upon him fifteen years before, and he drove back the need of expansion. She would not understand his struggle—her stern uprightness would despise it—and perhaps it was best, in case they met, that she should not know that Madame Duclos had been Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire. He closed the door with a sigh and, crossing to the window, raised the curtain and looked out again where the moon rode high above. The glittering snow seemed hard and cold now and the outstanding wing of the great house frowned sternly down on the terrace. He felt that neither his home nor his mother would welcome a prodigal, nor could he have laid bare the motives of his decision to their unbending judgment. The Freiherr von Ostenburg must crush all romance from his life at the bidding of duty, but Heinz was not strong enough to obey.

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CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING GOSSIP AND MADAME DUCLOS

FRAU VON WISCHENHEIM was receiving visitors on a certain afternoon in January. Her apartments had been crowded with a moving stream both of men and women for several hours ; but now all had melted away except Frau von Hartlingen who had brought her knitting, prepared for the exercise of a rapier-like tongue on her neighbours' reputations, and Frau von Fink whose daughter, Gretchen, sat in a corner exchanging confidences with Adela von Wischenheim. The three elders nodded their heads together mysteriously, for politics had by no means usurped the place of gossip in their pleasures, and scandal was far more entertaining than the Spanish War.

The hostess herself was a sleek, sleepy lady of some fifty years old, who considered her name so great an ornament that she did not condescend to the trouble of dressing well. Her husband had obtained a good post under the new government and she was consequently in a position to entertain both French and German society and to absorb the scandal of both. No one could, indeed, accuse her of evil-speaking, so cunningly did she allow her gleanings to glide from her ; but on investigation every piece of gossip would have been found a passenger through her lips at some stage of its

existence. Her chief accomplishment, and the one on which she most prided herself, was the art of exquisite embroidery—save for this she was a stupid woman ; indeed she thought learning unbecoming in a lady.

“ Frau von Barby and Veronika promised to come,” she said in the pause that followed some interesting inuendoes concerning the King and one of the Queen’s ladies. “ I wonder they are not here by this time.”

“ Veronika is growing into a headstrong, wilful girl,” said Frau von Hartlingen. “ Her mother spoils her, and really the admiration she receives is quite unnecessary. I see no great beauty in her ; she is too tall.”

“ Was it true that she refused Herr von Ostenburg before he left Cassel ? ” asked the hostess.

“ He evidently admired her very much—so much as to make her rather conspicuous,” said Frau von Fink who was annoyed that Gretchen had made so little impression on the Freiherr.

“ If she refused him she will repent her folly,” said Frau von Hartlingen sharply. “ The Barbys are as poor as they can be, and should have been grateful for such an offer. I don’t know whether she is waiting for a prince ! Her mother ought to have insisted. There ’s that extravagant boy in the Bodyguard, too ; I hear he plays far too high.”

“ Perhaps the Freiherr never proposed at all,” suggested Frau von Wischenheim. “ From what I hear he is capable of behaving as he did without any further intentions.”

“ He is certainly not quite the sort of man I should choose for my daughter,” said Frau von Fink dryly. “ One hears, as you say, a good many stories about him, and so—— ”

Frau von Hartlingen pursed up her mouth incredulously.

"You must pardon a little wildness in such a fascinating man," observed the hostess. "But I could tell you—" She sank her voice, with a glance toward the two girls, and continued her tale in a whisper.

"I thought he looked so interesting," murmured Adela to Gretchen. She had conceived a sentimental admiration for Ostenburg, who had thought no more of her than that she was a shy, simple girl, too young to be amusing. Gretchen sighed; in the flesh she was rather afraid of Heinz, in the spirit she, too, admired him.

"In any case, Veronika von Barby," began Frau von Hartlingen; but Frau von Wischenheim laid a warning finger on her lips, for the door had opened to admit the subject of the conversation and her mother.

Veronika, though very simply attired, looked magnificent; she seemed to dwarf everyone else in the room by the strength and force of her personality and Adela, as she drew a chair forward, looked her admiration, for she was too sweet and simple-hearted to envy her friend.

"I saw Madame Duclos just now," said Frau von Barby, as she sat down near her hostess. "She told me that she was coming here and begged me to make her excuses for being so late. She had meant to start earlier, but was detained at the last moment. She was so pretty wrapped up in her furs!"

Frau von Hartlingen leaned forward; her movements were aggressive and the very clicking of her knitting-needles sounded pugnacious.

"Do you think Madame Duclos pretty?" she asked dryly.

"Why, undeniably so," replied gentle Frau von Barby in some surprise.

"For my taste she is too showy," pursued the other. "Her dresses are not in good style."

"She certainly has an air about her," said Frau von Fink deprecatingly.

Frau von Hartlingen's face assumed an expression of disdain that amused Veronika who was watching the elders while she talked to Adela.

"An air one is better without," she said. "I am sure she is a coquette."

Frau von Wischenheim pricked up her ears.

"Do you think it?" she asked, with slow enjoyment of the possibility. "Everyone says she is devoted to her husband—at least she appears to be so."

"If she is not a coquette, why dress so finely? A woman who has been married for fifteen years should not study her appearance to such a ridiculous extent. In a young girl one could forgive it, but Madame Duclos must be well over thirty. And look how the men crowd round her at every entertainment; she talks too much, encourages them too much—of that I am sure! And besides——"

"Can you not forgive a beautiful woman a little vanity?" interrupted Frau von Barby. "Madame Duclos cannot help exciting admiration by her great charm. She has a quick wit and the vivacity of her nation. I find her a very pleasing woman; she has seen and, I think, suffered a great deal. Have you not heard how she lost her parents in the Terror?"

Frau von Hartlingen drew herself up.

"I should at least not care for my daughter to be her intimate friend," she observed: a thrust in return for the rebuke. Madame Duclos had taken a

great liking to Veronika, and the girl was often with her.

"I do not think my daughter can learn any harm from so cultured a woman," said Frau von Barby gently but firmly. "Will you teach me that stitch I so much admired?" she continued, turning to her hostess. "I have brought a piece of canvas on purpose."

But Frau von Hartlingen was not to be so easily suppressed.

"One must, I suppose, forgive something to Madame Duclos on the score of her nationality," she said to Frau von Fink, evidently intending her remark for the other lady. "Still, I consider it bad taste to so openly prefer the society of men. She cannot exist without admiration. We may be sure that when she comes there will be an influx of gentlemen, otherwise she would find it much too dull here."

Veronika had listened with blazing eyes; this was more than she could suffer, and she flashed out hotly:

"You are mistaken, *gnädige Frau!* Madame Duclos is the simplest creature in the world. Is it wrong to be French and to wear one's clothes better than we do? Is it wrong to be witty and charming? You should hear her speak of the General! She is devoted to him and he to her! I cannot listen to such things said of my friend!"

The girl had risen and stood with hot cheeks before Frau von Hartlingen; her breast heaved, her grey eyes were almost fierce. Her mother laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"In my time young girls did not speak so to their elders," said Frau von Wischenheim, roused by this passage of arms; her daughter and Gretchen von Fink stared open-eyed at Veronika's courage.

The girl cooled ; she was quick to see that her warm defence was a little ridiculous ; yet she was unwilling to apologise for words spoken justly, though in anger. The uncomfortable silence that ensued was broken by the entrance of Madame Duclos, happily unconscious of the criticism to which she had been subjected, and another young Frenchwoman, Madame de Monticourt.

The presence of Anaïs seemed to diffuse a subtle element into the moral atmosphere, as the scent of violets that clung about her did into the actual. She was dressed very simply, but it was with the simplicity which comes of extreme research, and the grey dress, the large bonnet, the muff and pelisse of costly sable seemed part of herself. Very gracefully she came forward, greeted Frau von Wischenheim, shook hands with Frau von Barby, bowed to the other ladies, gave Veronika a little smile of mutual understanding, and sank into a vacant chair beside her hostess—all with perfect ease and absence of self-consciousness.

“ I am afraid I am a very late visitor,” she said, speaking German with a faint foreign accent that was very attractive. “ I was detained at home, and punctuality is not one of my virtues. But now you must let me admire your beautiful embroidery ! You fill me with envy every time I come here. Look, Catherine,” she turned to Madame de Monticourt ; “ is it not exquisite ? ”

Now flattery so delicately applied is hard to resist, even from one who is a coquette and a Frenchwoman, and Frau von Wischenheim thawed. She displayed her cushion with its bunches of finely worked flowers in the happy conviction that here, at least, she could excel Madame Duclos. The cloud passed and tongues wagged again freely ; but it was as if a line of silver

had been blent with the woof of conversation ; gossip was milder, slander less bitter. There was a softening influence in the room. Soon Frau von Hartlingen took her departure ; then Fritz von Barby, Brisserat, and two or three other men arrived, followed after a little time by Egon von Pustau. The company broke up into groups of merry, inconsequent talk—Anaïs the centre of one, Veronika of the other. Presently, in a lull, someone spoke of music.

“ That ’s just what we want ! ” said Madame Duclos.
“ Will not Fräulein Adela play to us ? ”

Frau von Wischenheim was as proud of her daughter’s music as of her own embroidery, but she thought it fitting to dissemble, saying :

“ She is no great performer, Madame.”

“ Are we to believe that, *gnädige Frau* ? ” rejoined Anaïs, with a smile. “ Fräulein, don’t refuse ! ”

Her request was followed by others and Adela, with a blush of pleasure, moved to the piano. She really played very well, though without soul, and a polite murmur of thanks greeted the close of her performance.

“ Those simple melodies are so much the sweetest,” said Madame Duclos, crossing to the piano and looking over the girl’s shoulder at her music. She certainly had the gift of saying such things as though they were high compliments ; it pleased her to please and she could no more help being gracious and charming than a swallow can help the grace of its flight. Adela glowed with delight and became a warm partisan of Madame Duclos on the spot.

Frau von Barby whispered something to her hostess.

“ Ah, you play yourself, Madame,” said she.
“ May we not have the pleasure of hearing you ?
Frau von Barby says you are a great musician.”

Anaïs turned, with one hand still on the piano.

"Frau von Barby flatters me, I am afraid," she replied with a laugh. "I play a little — not in any approved fashion, but just to amuse myself. Yet, if you like——"

"Please, Madame," said Veronika, imploringly.

Anaïs drew off her gloves, displaying the slender hands with their sparkling rings, and sat down before the instrument. She was not a brilliant player, but her touch was charming, her expression perfect, and in the delicate cadences which she chose one could hear the throb of a human heart ; romance, longing, sorrow, she wove these things together and let them ring through even the gayest melodies. Last of all she played a little dance, a gavotte that was merry and yet pensive, a simple thing to which her playing gave soul. Veronika had heard it before, for Madame Duclos was singularly fond of it,—she had told the girl with a sigh that it reminded her of the past,—but to the rest it was new, and upon the profound silence in which it ended there fell a little torrent of applause. Fritz von Barby, who had fallen head-over-ears in love with the charming Frenchwoman in an enthusiastic, boyish fashion, watched her with devoted eyes ; Briserat hastened over to the piano to compliment her, and she was busy enough for the next few minutes in deprecating the praises that were showered upon her. It was at this moment that a newcomer who had just paid his duty to Frau von Wischenheim spoke, loud enough to be heard through the room :

"I have just been told an interesting piece of news," he said, and at the words everyone paused to listen. "Yes, and I believe it's quite true," he continued, pleased to be the centre of attention. "The Freiherr

von Ostenburg returns to Cassel for good to-morrow. He has left the Prussian service and is about to become aide-de-camp to King Jerome. I have it on the best authority—Hammerstein's."

Anaïs was drawing on her gloves preparatory to departure, while Fritz held her furs ready to put round her. For an instant it seemed to Veronika, who stood near, that she grew very pale and stretched out a hand to steady herself by the piano. The girl stepped forward, asking anxiously :

"Are you not well, dear Madame Duclos?" But Anaïs had recovered her momentary weakness.

"Nothing — nothing, Veronika," she said with a smile. "The room is rather hot, that is all. The frosty air will soon set me right."

She crossed over to where Frau von Barby stood.

"Will you let me take Veronika home with me to dinner?" she asked. "The General is out and I shall be all alone. Please let her be charitable enough to keep me company!"

The elder lady gave consent and Veronika made her adieux with Madame Duclos and Madame de Monticourt, whom the former was driving. Gossip was flying fast when they reached the door with Fritz, Brisserat, and Egon in attendance.

"It is certainly most extraordinary," said the clear, high voice of Frau von Wischenheim. "Why should he so suddenly return to Cassel? I am sure there must be a woman at the bottom of the affair!"

"As at the bottom of every affair," rejoined lightly the purveyor of the news.

A woman! Anaïs bit her lip. Why, why, should he come back? Was it for her? Better far that he should have stayed away!

CHAPTER IX

DEALS WITH THE FRIENDSHIP OF ANAÏS AND VERONIKA

A MOMENT later the ladies were sitting in Madame Duclos's pretty sleigh, well covered with furs, and whirled through the sharp air to the accompaniment of a merry sound of bells. There had been much laughter and talk at the door as the three men arranged the rugs for them and helped them to enter, and Veronika noticed that Anaïs seemed rather excited still, chattering and laughing more than usual.

"What is this Freiherr von Ostenburg, whose arrival seems of such interest?" asked Madame de Monticourt presently.

"Ah, of course, he had gone before you came to Cassel," said Anaïs. "What shall we say of him, Veronika? You know him better than I."

"That he's a very clever and charming man, I suppose. His property — one of them, I should say — is quite near here; he is very rich, and renowned as a brilliant cavalry officer. I don't think I can describe him more accurately. What do you think, Madame?"

Anaïs laughed, perhaps rather nervously.

"That will do very well," she said.

"Then he's a decided acquisition," remarked Madame de Monticourt. "Is he unmarried?"

"Yes," said Anaïs. "But who knows how long that will last?"

"Of course he's a great *parti*! Fräulein von Barby, does Frau von Wischenheim talk nothing but scandal?"

"Sometimes," laughed Veronika. "Not very often."

"I don't mind evil-speaking when it is witty," observed Anaïs. "You, Catherine, have a wicked tongue sometimes!"

"You must not expect us Germans to be as witty as you are, Madame," said Veronika, with a smile.

"Bah, it's not a question of nationality, only of temperament! But I must be careful, Frau von Wischenheim is a friend of yours!"

"Not so dear a one as all that! We have known her for a long time and she is good enough to chaperon me sometimes, as my mother does not care to go out."

"Your mother must let me do that office now! I shall be very strict!" said Anaïs.

Veronika and Madame de Monticourt laughed incredulously and it was in high good spirits that they stopped to drop the latter at her house.

"She's a dear, merry little thing," said Anaïs as they drove on. "I've known her for a great many years in Paris and I'm glad she has come here. But now you and I will have a cosy evening together, and I won't see any visitors."

It was cold enough in the street to make the warm house doubly pleasant, and Madame Duclos's bedroom, whither she invited Veronika to remove her outdoor wraps, seemed a very nest of luxury and comfort. While the maid rearranged her mistress's hair and exchanged her boots for a dainty pair of slippers, Ver-

onika, who had very quickly taken off her bonnet and pelisse, wandered round with little cries of ecstasy and admiration. This perfection of details, of feminine elaboration, which was so wholly foreign to her own nature, seemed a very part and parcel of Anaïs Duclos, the fitting frame to her frail, delicate beauty, and the girl delighted in it, as she delighted in everything pertaining to her friend. Such a friendship was a new and most charming thing in her life ; she gave to it the enthusiasm, the depth, that she would have given to love, and Anaïs, while she accepted the girl's admiration, returned it by one of the tenderest affections of a life that had been singularly destitute of women friends. She was, perhaps, all the fonder of her by reason of their great difference both of form and character ; a beautiful woman will almost instinctively distrust another who is beautiful in her own style, but here there was no comparison, for Veronika's splendour, utterly independent of dress—on which she was too impatient to spend time or care—only enhanced the grace, the more artificial if more tender loveliness of Anaïs Duclos. Curiously enough, too, their ages seemed sometimes reversed, so much stronger and firmer was the younger woman, in spite of all her immaturities and girlishness.

" You have such pretty things, Madame," she said, fingering pleasurably the silver of the dressing-table by which she stood.

Madame Duclos rose, released from her attendant's hand.

" I could not live without them," she said. " So ! I am ready at last ! You may go, Toinette. Did you see the General's last present to me, Veronika ? "

Tenderly passing her arm round the girl's waist she

drew her to a little cabinet which she opened with a key that hung round her neck on a fine chain, and took from one of the drawers a diamond pendant curiously worked. Veronika gave a cry of admiration as she took it in her hand and moved it so that the firelight might flash upon it.

"It is exquisite!" she exclaimed. "How nice it must be to have such beautiful presents, Madame!"

"My husband knows my foibles and is very good to them.—But you must not say 'Madame' any more, Veronika! It is so formal, and I hate formality."

The girl's face glowed, and she said simply:

"Thank you! Yes, it will be much nicer to call you 'Anaïs,' if you permit it. And it's such a pretty name!"

"One feels more intimate with Christian names, does one not? I like to be called by mine—that is to say, by people I like," Anaïs added with her charming smile.

"Oh, don't shut up the cabinet," pleaded Veronika. "There are such fascinating things in that drawer. May I look?"

Anaïs opened the other compartments for her friend's inspection. Some of the jewels were of great worth and rarity, others of less value were distinguished for the beauty of their setting or the quaintness of their design. One guessed that they had been collected by a fine taste, not merely by the desire to possess gems of a high price. Veronika was charmed; she looked and admired to her heart's content. Presently, far down in a tiny drawer, she came across an old, worn leather case which she opened as she had done the rest, expecting to find some rare and antique jewel. But instead she saw a ring of plain gold, worked in a most peculiar design, though seemingly of little worth.

“What a curious ring!” she exclaimed, looking at it with interest. It seemed to her that she had seen such a ring before, but she could not remember where.

Anaïs, who was replacing a necklace in its case, started.

“It is an old one—it was given me very long ago,” she said hastily, with a gesture to take the case from Veronika’s hand.

The girl gave it back and Anaïs glanced at the ring for a moment before shutting the case. For her it had a value far above that of all her other jewels put together, for Heinz had given it to her when they were betrothed—the copy of an old ring made for some long-dead Ostenburg in years gone by,—and it was the one thing which Anaïs Duclos kept of the many trinkets of Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire.

“Come, that is really all,” she said with a smile, closing the cabinet. “I, for one, want to sit in a cosy chair and gossip at my ease.”

“Oh, you’re tired and I have kept you standing all this time!” exclaimed Veronika, with sudden remorse.

“But it did n’t tire me at all. I like to show you my possessions. Don’t they say that women always cement friendship by displaying their wardrobes to one another?”

“Well, we’ve begun properly then,” rejoined Veronika. “I do love jewels! They always fascinate me and merely to handle them is delightful. You are a lucky person, Anaïs.”

“Am I? Some day you’ll have jewels of your own—and the day ought not to be very far distant. I can picture you with diamonds flashing in your magnificent hair; why, you would be sublime! Look!” She made Veronika pause before a long glass in the corner,

and laughingly stood on tiptoe beside her. "You're magnificent now," she said; "and I am sure there are a great many people who think so, or else the inhabitants of Cassel have neither heart nor taste."

But Veronika was not altogether satisfied with the reflection in the mirror.

"You are very good to say that," she murmured doubtfully, looking at the two figures. "But indeed it is not so, Anaïs. When I stand beside you I feel so rough, so unfinished—I can't describe what I mean, but I see it there in the glass! Even if I were rich I could never dress as you do."

Anaïs gave a low laugh with a suspicion of amusement in it. Then she led the way to her boudoir and without speaking nestled down luxuriously into an armchair, while Veronika sank on the floor at her feet with a sigh of content. An utter disregard of elegance was characteristic of her and had brought down the wrath of teachers and elders many times; but what in another would have seemed ungraceful was in her not without attraction—at least Anaïs, the great lady, saw no fault to find.

"I'll tell you a secret," she said, laying her hand tenderly on the ruddy head. "You have the power of making people forget your clothes, forget all but your face, yourself. I must use dress as an ally, and a very strong ally—if I did not care what I put on nobody would think much of me,—but you have a style in yourself which is independent of it and which is the highest test of beauty. You and I are very different."

Veronika turned her clear grey eyes to Anaïs's soft, dark ones.

"Oh, but you flatter me," she said wonderingly.

"You—you have every perfection, and I am quite an ordinary mortal!"

Anaïs laughed again, saying softly :

"You're very young yet, if you can speak like that. Men don't think you an ordinary mortal, and I am surprised that they have not told you so by this time! I wonder," she mused, "what sort of man it is that you will care for—I know that you have a great wealth of love to give some happy person. What will he be like?"

"I don't know," said Veronika, with a smile.

"But every girl has an ideal—a dream-hero! I won't believe but you have sometimes thought of it. What do you wish him to be?"

The girl dropped her eyes; she was thinking of the man who had offered her his name a month ago.

"I scarcely know," she said at last. "I suppose it is impossible that one should have everything perfect. I should like him to be a soldier, and my chief wish would be that he should love me with all his heart and soul—I would not ask more."

Anaïs rested her head on her hand meditatively.

"But then," she argued, "there are so many men who could give one love—real love—and there is only one that would be the right love. No, Veronika, I ask more than you do. I ask a man in every way greater than myself. The world must admire him; he must do brilliant actions, think great thoughts. I must be able to worship his genius as well as love himself. I must feel his wit more piercing, his knowledge deeper than mine; perhaps, even, I should wish to be a little afraid of him—sometimes. You have one of those wide, generous natures which can love a being in some respects inferior to themselves and I dare say

your hero may be a quite commonplace man whom you will endow with the overflow of your own splendid self : but I—I who am weak and yet ambitious——”

She broke off abruptly, realising that she had a listener.

“Why, what nonsense I am talking,” she said with a laugh. “Your German air makes me romantic !”

Veronika caught her hand and held it for a moment without speaking.

“Oh, but I understand,” she whispered. “It is I who am simpler than you—I should be contented with so much less.”

Anais leaned back on her cushions with a little sigh.

“Then has no man told you that he loves you yet ?” she asked half playfully.

“No one, Anais ; they’ve paid me compliments and that sort of thing, no more.”

Madame Duclos’s fingers closed just perceptibly on the arm of her chair as she asked :

“So it is not true what they say—that you refused Herr von Ostenburg ?”

Veronika started.

“Oh, I thought no one knew,” she said quickly.

“Yes, Herr von Ostenburg asked me to be his wife and I told him that it was impossible.”

“But then, if he asked you to be his wife, he surely told you that he loved you !”

“No ; he asked me to be the Freifrau von Ostenburg, because it was fitting that there should be a Freifrau von Ostenburg and because his mother considered me suitable to that position. No more.”

“No more !” Anais breathed the words with a sigh of relief. “Do you mean,” she said very gently, “that, if he had fulfilled your condition of loving

you with all his soul, you would not have refused him?"

Veronika bent her head down so that the elder woman could not see her face.

"Perhaps," she murmured; "it is so hard to say. He is the most charming man I have ever met and yet I was sometimes afraid of him. We were real friends; but I don't think I was in love with him, if that is what you mean: I was n't sure at the time. I don't know whether I ought to tell you, but he was quite honest about it, and he spoke of his betrothal to a French girl a long while ago. He has never forgotten her, I think, and I could not have married a man knowing that his heart was full of another woman all the time."

"And you are quite sure that if he came back, as they said to-night, you would still be of the same mind?"

"He would not ask me again, and if he did I should not alter my opinion."

"Perhaps he is coming back because of you?"

"No. He accepted my decision and was not—broken-hearted! I wonder why he is coming back, though! I am glad of it, for I hope we shall be friends again."

Anaïs laughed nervously. Why had she asked Veronika all these questions? What did it matter to her whether he cared for the girl or no? She had no right to rejoice at what she had heard.

"In any case we shall know soon enough," she said lightly. "But there is someone else I want to ask you about. Has it never occurred to you that a certain Captain of the Bodyguard worships the very ground under your feet?"

Veronika looked up and met the dark eyes that were only merry and a little mischievous now.

“ Whom do you mean ? ”

“ Egon von Pustau, of course ! ”

“ Egon von Pustau ! ” echoed the girl in genuine astonishment. “ Why, I ’ve known Egon ever since I was a baby ! ”

“ And is that any reason why he should not have discovered that you are the one woman in the world ? You ’re not a baby any longer, you know ! But I need not tell you ; you are as sure of his devotion as I.”

“ Indeed, indeed I ’m not ! ” protested Veronika. “ I wonder—yes, he has looked at me sometimes lately with eyes that puzzled me,—but no, why should he ? And he has never made love to me like the rest—the ones who say they admire me, you know.”

“ He ’s a shy lover who dares only speak by the eyes ! And if I am right, what should you say to him ? ” asked Anaïs, bending laughingly forward. “ Why, it ’s a shame to tease you ! But he ’s a good, dear boy, I am sure, and no one can doubt that he loves you ! ”

“ I never dreamed of it ! ” said Veronika. “ If all my friends are going to fall in love with me, it will be dreadful—and Egon is such a good friend !—But I must think ; I must watch him when next we meet. You won’t tell anyone ? ” she asked anxiously.

Anaïs assured her of her entire discretion. “ She does not love him yet,” she thought. “ But it may come ; and he is worthy of her—quite worthy.” Aloud she said, bending to kiss Veronika’s cheek :

“ And you will not be cruel to the poor fellow when next you see him ? ” Maybe she thought to secure for her friend a happier life than her own had been.

At this moment the maid entered with a letter for Madame Duclos. She took it carelessly, thinking it some note of little importance, and with a word of excuse to Veronika, broke the seal ; but the writing gave her a sudden thrill—it was unfamiliar to her now, yet not wholly strange—and with some excitement she turned to the signature. She was not mistaken : the “Heinz, Freiherr von Ostenburg ” was bolder, stronger than in the old days, but there were certain turns, certain individualities of penmanship which had graven themselves on her heart in years gone by ; the writing had only changed as the man himself had done—broadened, matured, developed. Even while emotion made the letters swim before her eyes her judgment reproved her, and she was able to read the contents of the brief note calmly enough. It was expressed formally and gave no clue to the fever of impulse which had dictated it—he announced his intended return and begged that in their future intercourse he might retain that friendship which she had offered him—but between the lines she read that he was coming back for her sake, to be near her—then cast the thought aside with a quick-drawn breath and laid down the letter as if in protest against her thought. So swift had been her changes of mood that Veronika, immersed in the ideas which Anaïs had opened out before her, had not observed them.

Madame Duclos broke the silence first, saying brightly :

“ Will you come with me to Napoleonshöhe tomorrow, Veronika ? They are skating on the great lake, and I have a new sledge which is a marvel of beauty—a swan, lined with pale-green velvet. It is a gala day and we shall enjoy ourselves amazingly.”

Veronika sprang up, clapping her hands in genuine delight, and until her departure there was little talk but of sledges, dresses, and such-like frivolous matters.

“Remember to be kind to Herr von Pustau,” laughed Anaïs, as she kissed her friend at the top of the stairs when the latter took her departure some time after dinner, and Veronika turned a very merry face to her as she descended.

Madame Duclos went back to her boudoir and with a sigh opened the Freiherr's letter. She read it twice through with knit brows and then sat thinking, her hands clasped in her lap. Was he coming back for her sake? Surely that could not be! No man would be faithful to an absent woman for fifteen years—least of all such a man as Heinz von Ostenburg, if what she heard of him were true! But if not, why write to her? There was no need. She lifted a candle and went to the mirror, holding the light high that she might examine her face. Yes; she was beautiful still, the mirror needed no magic voice to assure her of that; men had lost their heads over her beauty before, might it not be the same with Ostenburg? Might it not be that Anaïs Duclos had charmed him, though Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire was forgotten? She quivered at the thought. The love of those other men had not troubled her; it had been easy to keep them at a distance. Would it not be equally easy with Heinz? Ah no! for her heart was the traitress. Perhaps the love of another man might have wiped away the old love, but she had given her troth to one whom she only esteemed, and Heinz still reigned in the inmost sanctuary of her being. The impulse was to kiss that letter, but she drove it loyally back; she would be faithful to the man to whom she owed all, the good man whose

name she bore, for a Sainte-Élisaire must not fail in her trust, and Jean Duclos trusted her. Ostenburg should never know ; she could act her part well—there must be no avoidance of him, no sign that his return pained her, but an open friendliness and frankness. Above all, if she found that he indeed loved her, she must feign not to know it. The best safeguard would be to tell the General the story of their betrothal. Oh, but she could not bring herself to tell him that—and it would be but a half-truth at best ! She was strong enough to fight her battle alone.

She set down her candle and laughed a little mirthless laugh. After all, there might be no battle ; he might be coming back for some totally different reason and might have written merely from courtesy—he was her husband's friend. He had forgotten, probably, as all men forget ; her present charm had intoxicated him for the moment, no more. It was foolish to think so much of him: she would read. Thus did Anaïs strive to deceive her heart, but her success was not very brilliant, and she found it hard to fix her mind on the volume of poems that she had taken from the shelf ; the question : " Why is he coming back ? " seemed to write itself on every page. At last there was a clank of spurs and sword on the stairs ; Anaïs dashed the tears from her eyes and went out to meet her husband, finding strength in his calm affection and in his cheerful inquiries after her well-being.

CHAPTER X

OSTENBURG'S RETURN

OSTENBURG reached Cassel close on the heels of his letter. He had chafed through a month of necessary delay at Berlin, refusing invitations, meeting as few people as he could, and earning some measure of unpopularity by his sudden changes of mood. He had sworn at the slowness of the post-horses all the way, and had astonished Veit by his irritability ; only when the roofs of Cassel and the glittering curves of the Fulda came in sight did he regain his calm. That night he threw open wide the windows of his old room at the " König von Preussen," where he was to lodge until he moved to apartments in the palace, and looked across to the gables and chimneys of the Königstrasse, heedless of the bitter cold. He was near her again, able to breathe the same air, to tread the same streets—was not this enough to satisfy any man ?

Veit explained his master's restlessness by the belief that he was still in love with Fräulein von Barby and unable to accept her refusal ; this the faithful servant never doubted would be reversed, judging the young lady's heart by his own devotion, and curiously enough the greater part of Cassel, though less prejudiced, was of his opinion. When Heinz was seen skating among the brilliant throngs on the lake at Napoleonshöhe next day speculation rose wildly, and mad conjectures

were hazarded by those who knew least about the matter. The King and Queen treated him with marked attention,—so much was certain—but the study of his behaviour to Veronika had to be postponed until she arrived. It was, however, observed that, while he exchanged greetings and compliments with the fair occupants of many sledges and conversed with many acquaintances who were enjoying refreshments in the pavilion at the end of the lake, he made himself the cavalier of no lady in particular. He was impenetrable as ever ; to the congratulations that were showered upon him by reason of his appointment, he responded with an enigmatical smile and a shrug of the shoulders: one could hardly guess whether he were pleased to be back in Cassel or not. He was presented to many of the new arrivals and among others to Madame de Monticourt who had been seized by great curiosity concerning him.

“ I have heard a good deal about you, Monsieur,” she said, looking at him over her cup of coffee.

Heinz bowed.

“ I see now,” she continued, “ that you have at least one good quality : you skate to perfection ! My husband and I were remarking you.”

He bowed again, saying :

“ Madame does me too much honour. We Germans skate as soon as we can walk. Man adapts himself to circumstances, and we have made our frost and snow minister to our pleasures.”

“ With great success,” she rejoined, looking across the lake.

He followed her glance and smiled, for it was indeed a pretty scene. The sky above was pale and clear, the trees bent beneath their load of hoarfrost, and the

glittering surface of the lake was covered with ladies in sleighs of fantastic forms pushed hither and thither by fur-clad cavaliers, and with men skating from one to the other or cutting elaborate figures in the less crowded corners. The pavilion of snow beneath which Madame de Monticourt and Ostenburg were standing seemed like some elfin palace, and flags hung to the trees with garlands of evergreens added to the peculiar effect shown by nature twisted to the artificial taste of the time. The bank, too, was merry with sleighs and horses which drove up continually to discharge their occupants. Voices and laughter mingled with the murmur of skates on the smooth ice, and the crisp, cold air seemed to give a new glow to beauty, a new zest to pleasure. King and Court were enjoying themselves to the top of their bent, careless of the fate of empires, and Jerome's favourite saying: "*Morgen wieder lustick!*" was certainly carried out to the full.

Madame de Monticourt kept Ostenburg at her side for a little while, trying with her mischievous eyes to penetrate the mask of his face. At length she saw that his glance wandered from her to the bank with a sudden, momentary illumination; she looked, knowing that she was on the track of the secret, and saw Madame Duclos driving up with Veronika and the General. "So Cassel is right!" she thought and, with womanly interest in an affair of the heart, did not feel offended that Heinz took the first opportunity to escape and skate to the bank. Other eyes were on him too and, blinded by their own belief, did not observe that his glance rested on the elder woman rather than on the younger. It is always hard to discredit one's own sagacity.

Anais met the glance just as Monsieur de Brisserat

gave her his hand to descend ; prepared for the meeting, she bowed with a faint smile, and chose the arm of young Fritz von Barby among the score that were offered to lead her to the ice. A month's sojourn had sufficed to gather a little court about the beautiful woman, to whom love and admiration seemed naturally to cling, and Heinz saw with a pang of jealousy how she laughed and talked with these other men, as if she had not a pain or care in the world. Before he could reach her she was whirled away by Norvins in her tiny sledge, swan-shaped and lined with palest green to match her bonnet and pelisse ; he was forced to await her return, unreasonably impatient, and angered at her neglect as if it had been an injury.

With Veronika he exchanged a few words before she, too, was carried off by Egon, who had made himself her escort. She seemed glad to see him and quite ready to ignore any interruption to their friendship ; but certainly there was in their meeting nothing to confirm rumour, and Madame de Monticourt, who was making her own observations, remarked this. She met Ostenburg's eyes as he turned away from Veronika, and beckoned that he should come and speak to her. He could not refuse, and indeed, so long as Anaïs was not there, he cared little with whom he conversed. Madame de Monticourt went straight to the point she wished to disentangle, saying :

" How beautiful Mademoiselle von Barby is ! "

His half-ironical answer gave no clue :

" If it were not for Madame de Monticourt, she would be the most beautiful woman here ! "

" It's evident that Monsieur von Pustau thinks her the most beautiful," she rejoined, looking at him curiously to perceive whether he betrayed any

jealousy. There was none in face or voice as he answered :

"Pustau is my greatest friend and I wish he might have luck in his wooing."

"No ; he is n't in love with Mademoiselle von Barby," Madame de Monticourt thought. "I must find out who it is !"

A few minutes later Norvins guided Anaïs to the bank ; her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks glowing—for the moment she had given herself up to the sheer physical delight of speed and motion. She was talking merrily to the Frenchman as he gave her his hand to descend when she found that Heinz von Ostenburg had come forward to greet her.

"And so we have to welcome you back to Cassel, Monsieur," she said lightly, giving him the tips of her fingers to kiss. "I am glad you are no longer to be reckoned among our enemies."

"Madame has surely no enemies!" laughed Norvins.

"I spoke of the enemies of France, Monsieur ! Monsieur d'Ostenburg is now in the service of King Jerome, and so a subject of the Emperor."

"Were Madame Duclos France, France would have no enemies," said Heinz. Something thrilled beneath the lightness of his words, and Anaïs caught her breath, but she acted her part unflinchingly.

"That's a mere commonplace of compliment !" she mocked. "I thought the wit of Monsieur d'Ostenburg would have found something finer !"

"For Madame Duclos every compliment must seem commonplace," said Norvins. "May I bring you some coffee, Madame ? You look cold !"

She shivered and plunged her hands deeper into her muff.

"Yes, please, Monsieur," she said. "It is very cold! How delightful it must be to skate! You grow warm as you fly along. Herr von Barby skates well. Look at him! You Germans have the advantage over my compatriots."

"A mere matter of habit," said the Freiherr.

"And why should not women skate?" she pursued. "We should, I am sure, be better at the exercise than men. Why not, I repeat? We can dance: and Monsieur de Norvins says that dancing and skating are alike. What say you, Monsieur von Ostenburg?"

"Madame is, as always, right! If she would overcome the terrors of learning to skate, she would, I am sure, excel us."

She shook her head.

"Compliments always! I want the truth — no idle speeches. I will learn to skate!"

"The universe does not forbid it, Madame; there is no need to be defiant," said Heinz.

"And when will you learn?" asked another gentleman.

"When? Why now—at once!" cried Anaïs. She was a little overwrought, excited, ready to drown the pain at her heart by the gratification of any whim.

"And yet there are difficulties," someone suggested. "Where shall we find a skate to fit Madame's foot?"

She glanced at Ostenburg; he fell in with her mood, eager to please her.

"A boy's skate would do. You really mean it, Madame?"

She nodded impatiently.

"If you will wait a minute." He excused himself, and was gone on the instant.

Monsieur de Norvins returned with the coffee, and

Anaïs sipped it, talking excitedly the while to the little group of men who had gathered round her. She had not long to wait ; Heinz was soon back, followed by a small boy who carried his skates. Anaïs gave her cup to one of her neighbours, clapped her hands delightedly, and spoke a few friendly words to the possessor of the skates as he doffed his cap, leaving him rosy with pleasure. Children, with an instinctive appreciation of her charm and a genuine admiration for beauty, always worshipped Madame Duclos, and Hans von Wischenheim felt honoured to lend her anything. He stood by and watched with interest while Ostenburg, who had no intention of ceding his rights, kneeled before her and fastened the straps about her boots with strong, gentle fingers.

Anaïs would not allow herself to think. She was merry, charming, defiantly happy—so determined to make no difference in her behaviour to Heinz and to the rest of the world, that she almost cheated herself into the belief that she felt none. He thought her careless and forgetful and her very indifference made him less guarded, though it was intoxicating to kneel there with her foot in his hand, to exchange thrust and parry with her swift wit—just the wit a woman should have : quick, bright, delicate, with an undercurrent of real humour, rare in her sex.

“ Who is to give me my lesson ? ” she asked, surveying a steel-armed foot critically, when the task of fitting the skates was accomplished.

Several gentlemen were willing enough, but she waved them back, saying :

“ It must be the best skater here. I will trust myself to no other. Who is the best ? ”

The men hesitated, unwilling either to claim or

reject the distinction ; but Heinz von Ostenburg, secure in his knowledge of superiority, held out his hand. His assurance won the day.

" You have a fine conceit, Monsieur," was the only reproof he suffered as Madame Duclos accepted his assistance.

" Not that, Madame," he rejoined ; " but an eagerness to claim what *ces messieurs* seem too modest to desire."

Disdain became him ; he looked superb as he gave Anaïs his support.

" So ! Carefully !" he said. " Give me your hands crossed. It is quite simple."

She surrendered herself to his guidance with a wild pulsing in her blood and they set off, slowly at first, more swiftly as she gained confidence. The company turned to watch ; some shocked, some amused—the men admiring and envious of Ostenburg's post. Frau von Wischenheim, secure of her Adela's perfect demureness, stored up the tale of such impropriety for future delectation. Veronika, judging Anaïs by a wider standard, took the thing for what it would have been worth had Heinz been a casual acquaintance. Madame de Monticourt began to see the solution of the riddle which Cassel had solved so wrongly.

Ostenburg showed his pupil how to bend to the strokes, how to balance herself, how to strike out her feet alternately. Her natural grace made her quick to learn, and soon they seemed almost to fly. She was silent with the pleasure of it.

" We are not going too fast, Madame ? " asked Ostenburg. He was in a tumult of feeling ; he had not known how he had waited, yearned for the moment of being near her again.

"No, Monsieur," she said. "It 's delicious! I was thinking."

"I was thinking too, Madame. Do you remember a January day at Versailles? You wore a green dress, like the one you have on to-day."

"Your memory is very accurate, Monsieur!"

"In certain things accuracy is rather a curse than a virtue," he retorted swiftly, stung by her apparent indifference.

An awkward silence fell, but she broke it resolutely by saying :

"You have at least not lost your skill in skating since then."

"It is your goodness to say so. I love it! The motion, the smoothness—it 's only comparable to dancing with a perfect partner."

The embarrassment thawed and Anaïs would not let it rise again. Under the relationship of master and pupil they could talk freely, intimately almost, though without a shade beyond friendship. Ostenburg followed Anaïs's lead, thankful that she showed him at least a kindness which seemed to ensure that relation of sworn knight, protector that he still deemed possible even while the scent of her hair, the touch of her hands, the music of her voice, set his heart beating with a wild happiness : he asked no more of her than this, he told himself. At last, as they moved more slowly, he dared to say :

"You received my letter, Madame?"

She assented.

"And were not angry that I wrote?"

"Why should I be angry? It was courteous of you to tell me of your return."

He bent down to her and spoke in a low voice :

"Then you will permit me to call myself your friend?"

She hesitated a moment, afraid of herself; but it would betray that which she most wished to conceal, were she to refuse his request, so she said at last, simply:

"I have many friends, Monsieur, and shall be very glad to count you among the number. My husband is never weary of praising your good qualities."

Unreasonably enough Heinz was dissatisfied, though the answer was the very one for which he had hoped a moment before. He had believed friendship possible between them, and yet her assurance of it hurt him. She had forgotten, he thought; she was absolutely indifferent to all that past which meant so much for him. To conquer her indifference would be—ah, he must not dream such things! But dreams are unruly comrades and Heinz had never curbed his. With such dreams he had indeed done wrong to return, and he knew it, though he would not listen to the voice that told him so.

"Madame," he said at last, "if we are to be friends, there is one thing I must ask you. Are we strangers here in Cassel, or is it known what we were seventeen years ago?"

She hesitated again, angry with him for asking the question, though indeed it was a necessary one. Must it be put into words that they were bound together by a common deceit? Must she confess to him that even her husband did not know?

"I think, Monsieur, we are strangers," she said at last. "Perhaps we met, just casually, at Versailles years ago. That is the best!"

He quivered, and she felt that his hands tightened on hers.

"It shall be a secret, then, between you and me," he said in a low voice; and until they reached the pavilion he was silent, wondering whether she meant forgetfulness or too great remembrance by her decision.

Madame Duclos had shaken off her momentary thoughtfulness and was laughing like a young girl as she received congratulations on her exploit. Suddenly she met Ostenburg's eyes, and her laughter was checked. What folly had she been guilty of? This the man she was to keep at arms' length, to treat with calm indifference? They had been talking intimately, unreservedly, like dear friends; and she had allowed him to acknowledge the bond of a secret which seemed to promise something more than mere friendship! Why had Fate linked their lives so indissolubly? The bond galled her mood, and his half-involuntary reminder of it irritated her. She dismissed him with thanks too cold by contrast with her former warmth, and let Fritz von Barby unstrap her skates, while the General went to fetch her sleigh and Veronika. She was tired, she said.

Madame de Monticourt whispered to Brisserat, who was beside her:

"How blind you've all been! Monsieur von Ostenburg has not returned to Cassel for the sake of Fräulein von Barby!"

"For whose sake, then?" he asked curiously.

"For whom but Madame Duclos?"

"It's impossible! They have met once or twice, at most."

"Nevertheless I am right; I have watched him this afternoon. He has spoken but once to Mademoiselle von Barby—and how willing he was to teach Madame Duclos to skate! Will you take a wager on it?"

"Whatever Madame likes to suggest."

"I've a plan to try it. You must help me."

Brisserat declared himself at Madame de Monticourt's service, and the mischievous little Frenchwoman, meaning no harm, set her wits to work on a plot that should prove her belief right.

CHAPTER XI

MADAME DE MONTICOURT CONTRIVES A PLOT

MADAME DE MONTICOURT hastened to see Anaïs rather early the next morning. She kissed her friend excitedly and drew her down to the sofa.

"I want you to do something for me, Anaïs," she said persuasively.

"And what 's that?" asked Madame Duclos, smiling.

Madame de Monticourt hesitated for a moment.

"You won't be angry?" she said.

"Why should I? I don't know yet what it is you want."

"Well, I want to play a trick on somebody, and you must help."

"Ah, one of your practical jokes! Who is the victim this time?"

"Monsieur von Ostenburg."

Anaïs bit her lip. Angry both with herself and Heinz for the affairs of yesterday, she did not wish to be concerned with him in any way again, and a refusal was on her tongue; but she remembered that one so hasty might betray too much. She must have a reason for it.

"And what is the trick?" she asked, forcing herself to speak lightly.

"I must tell you the whole story ! Cassel is much occupied with the reason of Monsieur von Ostenburg's return — which they won't allow is merely from devotion to the French cause ; they set it down to his affection for your friend Veronika von Barby, but I watched them yesterday, and I swear he thinks no more of Veronika than—than my husband does ! And yet it's for the sake of a woman he has come back !" She laughed mischievously and whispered in Anaïs's ear : "Do you know who it is ?"

The other clenched her fingers and breathed : "Who ?"

"Why, yourself of course !"

Anaïs shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"It's the truth !" Madame de Monticourt assured her. "Have I not eyes ?"

She had no idea that she was hurting her friend, no idea that Anaïs would regard this matter differently from the admiration of a dozen other men about whom she had teased her in Paris.

"Monsieur de Brisserat and I have a wager on the subject," she went on, innocently.

"A poor subject for a wager !"

"You promised not to be angry ! Well, my plan is this : you are to write to Ostenburg telling him to be in the Augarten, behind the Orangery, some time this afternoon. If he comes he finds Monsieur de Brisserat, Monsieur de Norvins, and two or three others instead of you, and I shall prove that I am right !"

"But, my dear Catherine, this is the maddest prank that even your brain has ever invented ! You can't expect me to make assignations with a man whom—whom I barely know !"

"Barely know ! You talked to him long enough

yesterday ! And it is n't an assignation, since you will not be there. Anaïs, you must do it ! It will be a delightful trick and it will not harm you ! Your reputation stands above that. I would have written the note myself, but I was afraid he might by some chance know your writing."

Madame de Monticourt chattered on, coaxing her friend with every persuasion her tongue could compass. The matter stood in a different light to Anaïs than she could know or understand. The real motives of a refusal could not be explained; acquiescence might make the thing seem lighter than it really was. Anaïs wavered, moved by considerations which lay far beyond those which Madame de Monticourt was pouring in her ears, and indeed hardly listening to them. She was afraid, terribly afraid of herself since yesterday, when she had permitted him too much freedom and acknowledged that they were bound by a secret. She might so easily forget again—might break down in her part altogether and let him read her soul ; and she had been angry with him too : he deserved a rebuke, a punishment. She had chosen to fight her battle alone, and here lay a weapon to her hand : she had only to write the note, let the trick be played by these other people, careless of the finer issues at stake, and she would wipe out the impressions of yesterday by the conviction, forced upon him, that she was a mere heartless coquette, that, if she guessed his love, it was only to trifle with it, to throw it about in the circle of her friends. To appear the thing she was not seemed her only safeguard. She awoke to the consciousness that Catherine de Monticourt was still pleading her cause.

" You will be quite safe, Anaïs," she said. " We

will keep the secret, and Monsieur von Ostenburg is not likely to tell how he has been taken in ! ”

“ But how will it benefit you ? ” asked Anaïs, with a little tremour in her voice.

“ Oh, I shall win a dozen pairs of gloves from Monsieur de Brisserat and the satisfaction of being right ! Think how we shall be able to tease Ostenburg at the ball at the Russian Embassy ! ”

Anaïs gave a short laugh.

“ You will certainly have him in your power,” she said.

The mention of the ball decided her. She had trembled at the thought of meeting him, dancing with him, and now she could raise a barrier between them. She clutched at the weapon which seemed to offer safety as a drowning man clutches at a straw, feeling that she would by this means be able to persuade herself that he was nothing to her.

“ Very well, I ’ll do it ! ” she cried, with forced meriment. “ You must promise to be careful. Come and help me write the note ! ”

She went to her desk, took pen and paper with feverish haste, as if she feared that the strength to do the thing might fail her, and began to write while Madame de Monticourt looked over her shoulder, clapping her hands in triumph.

“ ‘ Meet me in the alley behind the Orangery at four o’clock this afternoon. I have something to say to you.—A.D.’ Will that do ? ” she asked, shaking the sand over the writing with nervous fingers.

“ Perfectly ! I ’m so glad you ’ve consented, Anaïs ! Now address it, and I ’ll see that he receives it in time.”

Madame Duclos folded the paper, scribbled the name

upon it, and gave it to her friend who flung her arms round her neck, rippling with laughter and saying :

“ Won't it be amusing, Anaïs ? ”

“ Very amusing,” Anaïs replied, with a queer little smile that was not far from tears.

She watched Madame de Monticourt go, smiling still, then flung herself down on the sofa and burst into sobs. The distortion of her soul to the man she loved was a bitter price to pay for loyalty, though in his anger, his disdain, she would be safe.

The note lay on Ostenburg's table when he returned from the palace about noon. He opened it, recognising the writing but thinking it merely an invitation, then read it through with astonishment. What did it mean ? What had she to say to him ? Was it something of the past ? Was it that she guessed his love and was not indifferent to it ? Why did she not ask him to her own house ? He was bewildered, puzzled—but to disobey the summons never occurred to him : the sworn knight must be at his lady's commands, whatever they might be ! He was still excited by the touch of her hands in skating, by her acknowledgment of the bond between them ; he read her summons in the light of her fire of yesterday—of her whimsical, excited moods—and went, himself in a glow of expectation.

He was at the rendezvous some quarter of an hour before the time appointed, pacing to and fro with his hands behind him ; the air was cold and the evening approached, but he did not think of that. At last the clock of the Orangery chimed four and he looked expectantly towards either end of the alley, which was a narrow one, enclosed on one side by a wall and on the other by a clipped hedge with no opening. Suddenly footsteps were heard and, to Ostenburg's consternation,

Brisserat appeared from the left, walking gaily towards him with another young Frenchman. If only Madame Duclos did not come ! Heinz put the best face he could on the matter and went to meet them ; but a sound from the right made him turn, and behold ! Norvins and Hammerstein were at his back. He paused, disconcerted ; and then, as he saw the laughing faces of his friends, the truth dawned upon him : he was tricked, and by Anaïs ! What did it mean ? For the moment he could not think, but at least these people should not take him at a disadvantage. He held out his hands gaily to one and the other, receiving their laughter with an impenetrable countenance and beginning the attack himself, before they had sufficiently recovered their composure to speak.

“ So this is the meaning of the mystery ! ” he exclaimed, laughing as heartily as the rest. “ I really could not fathom it ! I received a note, unsigned, requesting me to be here at this time ; the writing was that of a lady—whose I knew not, but certainly a lady’s. What was I to do ? One cannot refuse a lady’s commands. I came ; I find—all of you ! ” He laughed again. “ It was cleverly planned ; you quite deceived me.”

The others fell back. Had he really not guessed the writer of the note ? If so, their trick had failed to prove that for which it had been contrived.

“ And you have no idea who sent the letter ? ” said Norvins incredulously. “ Surely it was signed ? ”

“ I saw no signature ! And I tore it up, so cannot look again. Who can it be ? Frau von Truchsess ? The Princess Maximiliane ? —hardly, I know their writing. Ah, I have it ! ” He looked searchingly at Brisserat. “ You and Madame de Monticourt were

talking together a great deal yesterday. Confess ! It is Madame de Monticourt ! ”

They denied ; but Ostenburg feigned to disbelieve their denial ; he kept up his rôle of disbelief with perfect success until they parted at the gates of the Augarten, but when he was alone he took the letter from his pocket, and read it again with bent brows. Anaïs was a mere coquette then, a woman who played with the devotion of the men who loved her. He grew sick at heart : even the love of old times was not sacred : she had made a jest of the worship he had shown perhaps too warmly yesterday. He had lied to these others, but she should know the truth ! To-night, at the ball, he would demand the explanation that was his right.

He claimed her hand for a dance as soon as she arrived and led her to a small conservatory near the ballroom, where they would be alone.

“ Madame, I have to ask you something,” he said gravely, before she had time to remonstrate with his peremptory movements. “ You know this letter ? ”

She took the paper he held out.

“ And if I do ? ” she asked rather defiantly.

“ If you do, Madame, do you not think that the trick was perhaps a cruel one ? ”

“ Hardly cruel,” she rejoined, laughing. “ It was merely a jest ! Why do you speak of it so seriously ? ”

“ The thing may not be serious to you, Madame—it is to me. Yesterday you gave me the promise of your friendship—to-day you treat friendship as a toy.”

“ Yesterday ! ” she cried scornfully, with an ache at her heart.

“ And before yesterday,” he rejoined, in a low, bitter voice, “ more than friendship ! But I see that Madame has a short memory ; otherwise some things would

have been sacred to her. I am no doubt foolish to be hurt by such trifles, more foolish to set up an ideal of which the shattering must needs give me pain ; but you have succeeded in hurting me, Madame, if that was your object ! ”

His words hurt her far more and her success was indeed bitter, but she bravely played the part she had traced, laughing over the jest, and mocking him for his belief that it was a harsh one. He bit his lip and understood ; he was resolved that she should never read his heart again, never have the opportunity of hurting him, even though in her presence he was under her charm—more in love with her, cruel and heartless though he imagined her, than before.

When the music stopped he rose and offered her his arm gravely ; but she paused, saying with a laugh :

“ And you ’ll forgive me, Monsieur ? ”

“ Madame has shown me that there is nothing to forgive ! ” he replied coldly.

She winced and caught her fan more tightly in her fingers.

“ You are still angry,” she said very slowly.
“ Friends ought not to part like this ! ”

“ Madame has also shown me that I must not put too great faith in friendship,” he rejoined, with a smile that cut her.

She wavered ; the part was growing too hard.

“ Monsieur, it is you who are cruel now ! ” she cried. “ I thought you deserved punishment ! ”

He caught eagerly at what might justify her, saying :

“ In what had I then offended ? ”

“ You spoke of a secret between us ; you reminded me of that secret as a gentleman should not have done ! ”

"And it is for that I've been punished?" he cried, and then was silent. He wondered what she meant. If the secret angered her she was not so forgetful after all, for one is not angered by a thing merely indifferent. "Then you had a reason—you were not merely playing with a man's devotion?" he asked.

"Hush!" she cried, starting. "You must not say that!"

He bowed.

"Forgive me! I mean with a man's friendship! Explain yourself, Madame, for Heaven's sake!"

Anais knew that she was failing. A minute ago he had believed her what she wished—a coquette, a woman without a heart—now he had begun to doubt, and for the sake of her love she could not but rejoice in his doubt. She was not strong enough to resist any longer.

"Only to teach you a lesson!" she whispered. What more could she say? What else was tangible? He must not know that the lesson was for herself as well as for him.

"I could have learned it less cruelly, Madame!" he cried. "If you wish it, that secret is dead—forgotten! Never by word or look will I remind you that we met before last December. Yesterday I was mad—in the future I will be careful. Only say that you will not be so cruel again, that you will accept my friendship as it is offered!"

How glad he was to be in the wrong himself, to ask pardon rather than to grant it!

She looked at him with unfathomable eyes. What a fool she had been to consent to Catherine de Monticourt's trick! It had only led to this—only to her defeat by the man to whom she could not lie, even to

save herself. She had attempted a feat beyond her strength. Better far to have left it alone !

“ Monsieur, forgive me ! ” she said, holding out her hand.

He bent and kissed it, saying :

“ It is I who have to ask forgiveness, Madame ! ”

Her weakness, her choice of a weapon which cut her hand while she used it touched him to a fuller chivalry, for he had guessed more than she had betrayed. He would fight down all that made friendship a hard thing, so that she might trust him ; he would never presume upon what her impulse might grant, never offend by word or glance—this he swore as his lips touched her hand. The fulfilment of his vow was yet to be seen.

CHAPTER XII

TREATS OF A DIFFICULT POSITION

MADAME DUCLOS had established a sort of salon—an assemblage of the choicer spirits of Cassel society who gathered round her at afternoon and evening parties, or at dinners where the talk was no less sparkling than the wine. Heinz von Ostenburg, accomplished as he was, became almost naturally a member of her circle, and, knowing that his favour depended on the manner in which he kept the vow made in a moment of enthusiasm, he loyally drove down love and played the indifferent friend with such success as to reassure Anaïs and to cool the gossip set alight by Madame de Monticourt's curiosity. Strangely enough the wild hopes which had surged up in the first glow of their meeting were quieted by the sight of Madame Duclos as hostess—the assured woman receiving her guests and surrounded by a court—and little by little he regained the serenity which the touch of her hands, skating, her dependence on his man's strength, had shaken, telling himself that he need ask no greater happiness than to see her and hear her—a vowed knight. Moreover, the General called him friend, welcomed him warmly to his house; and Heinz was an honourable gentleman, with the Freifrau's rigid code engrained in the finest fibres of his nature.

The General's open-hearted praise often smote Anaïs

with a sense of guilt, and once or twice she had been on the point of telling him the whole story of the past ; but she could not bring herself to the confession and each delay made it more impossible. Moreover, since the day of the ball at the Russian Embassy she had trusted Heinz and, trusting him, had grown calmer, more assured herself, though better than he she knew the dangers of the position—a position which only grew more perilous by intimacy, even while custom made it seem more safe. Ostenburg could not indeed often be near Anaïs without finding that reason gave him ample justification for his delight in her society ; his judgment must needs approve where his heart was enchanted, for even his critical, hardly satisfied intellect could discover no flaw in her mind. She was the life of her assemblies : her tongue was as swift to glide over frivolities as to discuss matters of graver import—war, politics, or literature. She was well-read, too,—a linguist, a scholar, a poet,—but with her learning had the feminine grace which saved it from pedantry, and she was clever enough never to let a man see that she knew more than he did. Her enthusiasm for Napoleon—an enthusiasm which overrode even the ingrained prejudice of the noblewoman—coincided with Ostenburg's own ; their tastes in poetry, in books, agreed, and for him Anaïs need never veil her knowledge. It was indeed enough to build a fine spiritual friendship upon, only such a friendship could not but be influenced by her radiant beauty, by the depth of her dark eyes, by the music of her voice ; and it was these things that made friendship perilous, even for a man less in love than Heinz.

For Anaïs there came in Ostenburg's presence that expansion, that relief which springs from the surety of

comprehension. His quick sympathy understood her at a word, a glance; he divined her moods, her wishes, and accomplished them before they were expressed; above all he was of her own world, a world to which the honest General had never belonged, and so, by comparison, the General, who with all his love for his wife had never made her interests his own, seemed doubly obtuse. Ostenburg had everything that Duclos lacked, and the one thing for which Duclos was distinguished — military genius — as well; indeed a dangerous friend for Duclos's wife! Anaïs was essentially a woman, despite her brain, and she had the admiration for strength and valour which no true woman, however intellectual, will accord to merely literary qualities. Ostenburg's brilliant reputation, the glow of exploits which, modest as his valour was concerning them, were poured into her ears by every soldier she met, must needs arouse her enthusiasm.

"Splendid he is!" Egon told her rapturously. "There's not an officer in Germany to compare with him! Not a thought for his skin, but right into the midst of them—cool as if the enemy were a field of turnips!"

She smiled on Egon, talked of other things in sudden fear of her own interest, and returned to the fascinating theme as if she could not resist it. Egon's fears had been set at rest and, trusting his friend's honour as his own, he was happy. Ostenburg's return he might deplore, might guess that he played with fire, but his loyal soul could not conceive the force of the temptation, or imagine that a man would accept his friend's hospitality while he loved his wife. Moreover, he, too, was won by Madame Duclos, whom at first he had been disposed to regard with suspicion, but

Veronika's friendship and her own charm and real goodness had disarmed him, so that he became one of her most loyal adherents. That he was a favoured member of her salon was a matter of some comment, as he certainly possessed no high mental gifts ; but Madame Duclos liked him for his frankness and simplicity as well as for his devotion to her Veronika. He came, sure to meet Fräulein von Barby : a pleasure at once sweet and bitter, for the young lady had developed a sudden turn for coquetry — afraid, Anaïs guessed, of yielding to the guidance of a heart which spoke in Egon's favour, and unwilling to forego the charm of homage and admiration. Never a thought of faithlessness came near the loyal fellow, but he alternated between hope and despair as Veronika's moods varied towards him, vowing in his modesty that she might have the choice of better men than himself. Madame Duclos, hinting at his secret with delicate tact, encouraged him to a confession of it.

"Have patience," she said. "Wait, and she will learn to know her true happiness. She is too fine a character to yield to love at first sight, so you need not fear these others. Work on her esteem and show her the grit of manhood in you. She will never be satisfied with mere butterfly admiration : it intoxicates her for the moment, and she's young enough to be cruel ; but wait and you will see."

Occasionally Frau von Barby accompanied her daughter to Madame Duclos's house ; more often her brother escorted her ; and it was amusing to hear the lad's elaborate excuses to do so. As the months passed he became more and more the slave of the charming Frenchwoman.

"It keeps a boy straight to worship a woman older

than himself," she said with a smile, when Ostenburg remarked on it.

"Is it then to you that he owes his reformation?" he asked.

"I hope so! He was wild, as a high-spirited lad will be when let loose from his mother's apron-strings. Frau von Barby was anxious—he contracted debts beyond their means, as you doubtless know, for he told me how generous you had been to him. I sent for the boy and gave him a lecture—with the result that you see!"

Heinz followed the lad with his eyes.

"We would all, I think, risk a scolding from such a school-mistress, Madame," he said rather sadly.

She made an impatient movement, saying:

"I expect greater originality of compliment here, Monsieur!"

But Ostenburg had spoken the truth. He was, without being aware of it, growing restless under the constraint he had to suffer. There was the need for expansion, the longing to lay open his heart once and for all, even at the risk of a scolding more severe than that which had fallen to Fritz's share. Opportunity, which is seldom wanting to a man's inclination, gave him the excuse and led to a new phase of the intimacy which was so perilous both to himself and Madame Duclos.

One day Anaïs was sitting in her box at the theatre with the General, Veronika, and Monsieur and Madame de Monticourt. A French opera was being sung, and in the pause after the first act several gentlemen came to offer their greetings. Brisserat was the first.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked as he kissed Madame Duclos's hand.

"What news?" the ladies inquired eagerly.

"That Ostenburg has been offered the title of Count and has refused to accept it."

"Refused!" exclaimed Madame de Monticourt.

"What did His Majesty say?"

"If it had been another man he would have been very angry; Ostenburg can do all things with impunity. He sweeps a grand bow, and says most unconcernedly: 'Your Majesty has my most humble thanks, but the memory of my ancestors will not permit me to eclipse the title they bore for centuries.' The King only laughed and forgave him, saying: 'You have at least all their pride, Monsieur!' And that's true enough! Think—Ostenburg the democrat quoting his ancestors! It was well the King did not see how he was laughing in his sleeve! But here he comes."

The door of the box opened to admit Heinz, who now wore the rich uniform of the Westphalian Hussars.

"What is this that I hear of you?" Anaïs asked, as he bent to greet her. "You refuse the King's most gracious offer! It is n't courteous!"

He shrugged his shoulders and sat down on the vacant chair at her side, saying:

"My dear Madame Duclos, you must not be angry. We were Freiherren von Ostenburg centuries before the Bonapartes were even heard of! I serve King Jerome—that's well enough! but to accept a title from the hand that creates Le Camus Graf Fürstenstein—that is more than I can do!"

"Be careful!" she warned him. "Walls have ears!"

"And new-made honour is precise in the observance it expects? Oh, I'm not afraid of Fürstenstein! Besides, we are all friends here!—I see that Fritz's

gift is happier than mine," he added in a lower voice.

He had sent her a bunch of exquisite flowers, and she wore nothing but the violets the boy had brought her ; she touched them with a smile.

" Because I wear it ? Silly boy, I like to give him pleasure ! But how did you know they were his ? "

" We were in the flower-shop together ! But it would have given me pleasure, too, if you had worn mine. Why did you deny it me ? "

She flashed her dark eyes up at him, veiling her heart with the glance of a coquette.

" Because I choose to do so, Monsieur ; these match my dress better. "

Her coldness irritated him, vowed knight though he was.

" And I choose that you shall accept a better gift and wear it, Madame, " he said, with a sudden fire in his indolent eyes.

" You will force me ? "

" You will do it of your free-will ! "

" I accept the challenge, Monsieur, " she rejoined lightly.

" Once you wore my flowers, " he persisted, unreflecting what the jealousy of the boy's favour meant.

" Must I tell you again that it is unjust to call one to account for youthful follies ? " she retorted with a laugh. " Fritz will smile at himself ten years hence—dear, generous boy that he is ! What 's that you 're quarrelling over, Veronika ? "

She was appealed to as arbitrator of a dispute that had arisen : whether a German could write a neatly turned set of complimentary verses as well as a Frenchman.

"But how am I to judge without proof?" she said.
"Come, we will have a competition. Who will champion the Teutons?—You, Herr von Pustau? You, Herr von Hammerstein? You, Freiherr?"

Ostenburg was by general consent declared the most fit to sustain his nation's honour. He accepted with a throb of the heart; the Fates seemed enrolled to shake his self-control. In the flash that passed as he met Anaïs's eyes she saw that he remembered those sonnets he wrote for her years ago. "Will he have lost the spontaneity he had then?" she thought, even while she named Norvins as his rival.

"Our subject, Madame?" asked the Frenchman.

She considered the debate demanded a personal one.

"My fan!" she said at last, opening it to show the device.

"Cupid and Psyche," said the dandy Brisserat.

"That is easy."

Anaïs pointed out the fineness of the painting, and presently the fan was passed from hand to hand that all might admire. Heinz was the last, and in some way as he took it from his neighbour it fell so that the delicate mother-of-pearl frame was splintered. He stooped to pick up the fragments with professions of regret, but Anaïs made light of it.

"You must let me have it mended, at least!" he protested.

"The thing is of no value, Monsieur; you must not take so much trouble."

"But, Madame, I should be covered with confusion. I must repair what my clumsiness has destroyed. Besides, I know the best fan-maker in the world; you would never discover him—he lives in one of the dirtiest streets of Cassel, but he's a genius! I insist!"

"I never knew Monsieur von Ostenburg clumsy before," murmured Madame de Monticourt to Brisserat at her elbow.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"That he sets a higher value on Madame Duclos's fan than she does, I suppose, and that I am winning the wager!"

Egon caught the murmur and looked round sharply. He met the cold, inscrutable glance of the Freiherr who, having conquered the fan, had moved over to speak to Veronika von Barby. They were good friends now, these two, and Heinz liked to provoke the girl's whimsical humour and pithy sayings. They chatted together while the music, of which nobody took much heed, began.

"I approve your answer to the King, Freiherr," she said presently. "If I were a man I would not take honours from Jerome Bonaparte."

"I think you would not serve him at all," he answered with a smile; "much less accept his gifts."

"*Timeo Danaos*," she quoted merrily.

"I forgot you were a scholar! But, Fräulein, you are careless of any gift, even if it be a good one, for you are playing now with the best thing the gods give."

"What do you mean?" she retorted. "You yourself are not so serious!"

"I am, on the contrary, desperately serious: I have just awakened to the consciousness that a month ago I played with fire. Be kinder to Egon, Fräulein Veronika, if you want me to speak plainly. He's the best fellow in the world, and I will not have his heart broken. You have not been nice to him to-night!"

She flushed a little, then laughed, saying:

“Hearts do not break so easily, Freiherr !”

“You are too young to guess how easily ! If I call him, will you make him happy ? It only needs a smile and a few kind words !”

She shrugged her shoulders and gave a half-willing consent.

“Egon !” he called. “Fräulein von Barby has just been talking of you ! May I exchange my place ?”

He bowed with a smile that made Veronika blush, and went back to Madame Duclos.

As he drove home an hour or two later he drew out the fragments of the fan and raised them to his lips, then looked at them meditatively. What impulse had made him claim them ? Wherein should he profit if Anaïs accepted his gift ? Was even her anger better than mere friendship ? Questions poignant enough, but he chose rather to sink into dreaming than to answer them. After all, such gallantries might be paid by any man to an avowedly beautiful woman, and he was resolved to be her true friend—was her friend. And the verses ? He set himself to compose them.

CHAPTER XIII

CONCERNING A BROKEN FAN

O STENBURG found Madame Duclos alone—strangely enough for the first time—when he called upon her next day. During the whole winter and early spring they had never met save in the presence of others, and Heinz thrilled with a sensation of pleasure as he realised that no one would interrupt their conversation. Yet the greeting was formal, and a restraint seemed to lie on both. Heinz shook it off the more quickly.

“It is not so much on behalf of myself that I am come,” he said, “as of Egon von Pustau. You have some influence with Fräulein von Barby; will you exert it to beg her not to trifle with a very faithful heart?”

Anaïs looked up, surprised.

“Ah, you do not think such affairs the province of a reputed *flâneur* like myself,” he continued rather bitterly. “I assure you, Madame, reputation may do a man wrong. Though you may not believe it I have an ideal, and once I was guilty of the folly of dreaming. My dream was that happiness lies in the union of two chosen souls, in the perfect marriage, and I cannot quite shake off the belief in it. You, a woman of the world, will doubtless shrug your shoulders! Nevertheless I hold to my ideal. Egon is a noble fellow; he

has a heart of gold. Fräulein Veronika is the finest-natured woman I have ever known, none the less so for her high spirit. Bid her yield to her generous heart, Madame, and reward Egon for his loyalty. I believe she loves him."

Madame Duclos smiled, and said :

" You have a masterful way of putting things, Monsieur. Veronika will not be persuaded, only guided. Yes, I believe, too, that his love will conquer her pride ; but he must wait ! She has just learned to play the only game in the world worth playing — and she is very young."

" But she can play the game you speak of with Egon for a partner."

" At present variety amuses her. The game is played in many ways. For some it is itself so absorbing that they care not who the opponent may be ; others play more fastidiously, caring only to choose a special adversary ; others again forget that it is a game, and hurt themselves—but I don't think Veronika will do that ! "

" It 's peril that gives the zest, Madame ; any other pastime is insipid by comparison."

" You speak from experience, Monsieur ? "

" I am one of the fastidious players," he retorted. " But Fräulein Veronika—— "

" I will use my influence—that I promise you ; she needs the ballast of his common sense. And so it was to matchmaking that I owe the honour of your visit ? "

" To another reason also," he said, " though you should not call my privilege an honour to you. I had to make good my clumsiness of last night."

She assured him that it was forgotten.

"By your kindness, not by my repentance. You will accept my reparation?"

She took the box he held out to her and opened it. Within lay a fan of exquisite workmanship: mother-of-pearl studded with diamonds. She spread it out mechanically, wondering at its splendour. It was indeed a princely gift, and the initial in rubies told her that skilled workmen had toiled the night through on her behalf.

"It is superb, Monsieur," she murmured; "a queen's toy!"

"For a queen's use," he rejoined.

"But indeed, Monsieur, I cannot accept it," she protested.

He sat down beside her on the sofa.

"Once you offered me your friendship, Madame," he said very gently. "Surely it is not friendly to refuse forgiveness!"

"Forgiveness?"

"Yes. If you reject my peace-offering I shall think you do not forgive the breaking of your fan."

"There was nothing to forgive. My fan was not worth the fiftieth part of this."

"To you—perhaps not!"

She read his face. The superb folly that wasted so much on a jewelled toy just to gain the broken fragments of her fan overwhelmed her, and she saw that to which custom had blinded her eyes. He was breaking the constraints of mere friendship and it behooved her to keep him within them even while the acknowledgment of his love set her heart throbbing.

"You will use the fan at the King's ball to-night, Madame," he said, looking at her steadily with eyes that glowed.

It seemed to him that her acceptance and use of his gift were a matter of supreme importance. All the fabric of calmness that he had built up crumbled away ; he stood face to face with an intense, passionate love that nothing could ever destroy. Alone with him Anaïs was less the radiant woman of the world, more the simple girl to whom he had been betrothed. Reverence of the queen had made tenderness seem desecration ; to-day she was uncrowned, and a great longing welled up again in his heart. At a sign from her he would have been at her feet, pouring out all that had been so long silent.

She was hesitating adorably, touching the fan with her slender fingers ; her woman's vanity unwilling to lose so lovely a thing, her woman's heart fighting to keep its coolness.

" Is it so wrong to take a friend's gift ? " he whispered, bending towards her and laying his hand on hers.

The movement roused her to action ; she saw that to refuse would acknowledge his power, the possibility of love between them—would attach to the thing greater importance than a mere natural acceptance. She forced a merry little laugh.

" Why, no, Monsieur ; I am too much a woman not to care for pretty things. And so, many thanks ! Now for the verses. You have brought them ? "

She rose and laid the fan aside on a table — briskly, to show him that she, at least, was reasonable. He rose, too, with a sigh, and gave her a paper from his pocketbook, then waited by the table while she perused it, glancing round now and then to note the soft hair and the pretty outline of her throat and arm.

Anaïs read with some disappointment. Her know-

ledge of the man's intellect had made her expect something more than common ; her own heart, perhaps, expected the greater warmth which, present, would have angered her. She read a second time, vexed that he should fall short of her ideal, vexed with herself for caring that it should be so.

" Monsieur von Ostenburg ! " she called him at last from the window.

" Madame is unsatisfied ? " he queried, coming nearer.

" Oh, Madame is well enough satisfied ! Your verses are perfect in form, elegant in sentiment—altogether irreproachable. Monsieur de Voltaire could not have done better ! "

" Bitter praise, Madame. Wherein do they displease you ? "

" If you want the truth, they are false, artificial. I thought that you Germans had a note more sincere than we. You are of the nation of Goethe, Monsieur, and yet you write as if Werther had not been. What of the romance you praise to me ? What of the influence of Bürger, Goethe, Tieck—all those poets whom you set me to study ? You write as if you had never read them ! Your grace is not the grace of nature, your conceits are the merest commonplaces of a poet-aster. You are no champion for your race, Monsieur ! "

She had touched on one of their frequent subjects of discussion and interest, and her fear of his new fire faded as she spoke on so familiar a theme. He listened patiently : to be reproved by her was sweeter than to be praised by another woman.

" How shall I answer you ? " he said at length, coming nearer to her. " The task was a hard one. Last night, when I had left the theatre, I sat long

writing, doing my utmost. I wrote a dozen poems ; each was torn up, either because I dared not show it you or because it was not good enough for your eye."

She touched the paper with her hand impatiently, saying :

"Granted, Monsieur. Yet how did your criticism pass this? Listen! It is not even logical."

She read through the verses, letting her judgment play upon them line by line. Heinz bent over her chair and followed, wondering at her keenness.

"You are a severe judge," he said when she had finished.

"I am a severe judge because you have the wit to write truer poetry, Monsieur."

"Truer! Madame, may I make my defence? I told you that I wrote lines which I dared not show you: those were true. A poet must let his heart expand, speak all that is in it: I had to say only a part. My verses are artificial, you tell me; they rouse your scorn. If I wrote what my heart dictated, you, who are cold and indifferent to all the past, you would deny me even the companionship, the friendship on which I live. With you lies the choice. Accept my verses as they are, or let me tell you how I love you!"

He spoke passionately, and Anaïs listened, twisting the paper between her fingers, her head bent. He must never know how much she cared.

"I am surprised to hear such an outburst from the Freiherr von Ostenburg!" she said very coldly. "I thought he would have respect for a woman. I believed his loyalty more than the slanderous tongues which speak of him."

He caught at her hand, saying :

"Forgive me, Anaïs!"

She started away and faced him with all the dignity she could gather.

"My name is not common property, Monsieur. Why cannot a woman offer a man friendship—and that I gave you—without enduring presumption?"

He fell back, cursing the folly which had brought upon him so harsh a reproof. He could not endure her displeasure.

"Madame, your forgiveness," he said very humbly. "I was mad, intoxicated; it is hard to remember that things are not as they were seventeen years ago. A man who has the reputation of a cynic should know better than to let his tongue run away with him. Your friendship is an honour of which I am not worthy, and yet—be merciful, and let me continue to enjoy it!"

He was brought back to sanity, to reverence; the impulse to speak had been punished and he was penitent, seeing his fault in the light of her anger. She read her victory in his grave eyes, and woman-like, sighed over it.

"And you will swear to speak no word that might offend friendship?" she asked slowly.

"I swear," he repeated impulsively. He was fired to a higher temper of chivalry, of self-sacrifice—borne by the current of feeling to which he could yield so readily either for bad or good.

Anaïs held out her hand frankly and thanked him.

"I am assured of forgiveness?" he asked, kissing it.

"I said it!"

"Then in token use my fan to-night," he pleaded.

"In token of forgiveness, I will, Monsieur. Good-bye!"

He went, and she sank down on the sofa, trembling.

She had fought bravely for loyalty, but her courage ebbed now that the fight was done. How easy to have yielded ! A word, a glance, and he would have known all. If only she were free, how sunnily might shine the future, assured of his love ! How hard was resistance ! She saw him before her with grey eyes aflame, heard his deep voice break its barriers, felt the burning touch of his hand, then quivered back in horror, hiding her face in her hands. If he had known that her indignation at his confession had been the mask to a wild joy at every word of it, that she would have paid the knowledge of his love with her life-blood !

Presently she heard a step and the clank of a sword. It was the General. She smoothed her dress and moved to her embroidery-frame. He came and bent over her ; she had the impulse to lay her hand on his shoulder, to cling to him, as if in protest at herself, in confidence in his strength. His whole worn face softened, and he kissed her dark hair. Though the two were spiritually far apart, the keeping up of a certain intimacy of gesture and speech made the honest General ignorant of their separation. He loved his wife ; but his profession filled his mind, and that she could not understand, nor did he expect it of her.

“ You have had no visitors ? ” he asked.

“ One, *mon ami*. Monsieur von Ostenburg was here for a few minutes. He brought the verses I set him and Monsieur de Norvins to write last night. You remember ? ”

“ Yes, yes, ” said Duclos, vaguely.

“ You remember at least that he broke my fan ? ”

“ Of course. ”

“ Well, he has brought me another to replace it. ”

“ Ostenburg would be sure to act generously and

gallantly, *mon amie*," said the General, disposing himself comfortably in a chair and brushing a speck of dust from his uniform ; he was something of a dandy after his fashion.

Anaïs smiled a little tremulously and moved to fetch the fan from the other end of the room.

"It is very handsome, Jean," she said, opening the box. "I hope you will not think I did wrong in accepting it!"

He looked at it for a moment in silent admiration.

"It 's superb!" he exclaimed at last, drawing a deep breath. "Superb! Ostenburg 's a rich man. *Mon amie*, even I cannot often afford to give you such jewels."

"You have given me finer things than this," she said gently. "But—I could not well refuse. It is so beautiful, and he merely brought it to replace the other."

"If it gives you pleasure why should you refuse, *mon amie*? No, no! Without doubt Ostenburg desired to make some return for our hospitality—gracefully done, too!" He took his wife's hand and patted it softly. "And if he admires the prettiest face in the world, who shall quarrel with him? Not I! I trust my Anaïs with blind eyes, and I am right—*n'est-ce pas*? Her head is not turned by an empty compliment!"

Her kiss on his brow gave him the full assurance he asked.

She went to the ball superb as a queen ; Ostenburg's jewels glistened in her hand—a token to him of forgiveness—a pledge to her of loyalty to the man who trusted her.

CHAPTER XIV

TREATS OF ARCADIAN MATTERS

SPRING changed to summer, and the Court, followed by all the more fashionable inhabitants of Cassel, removed to Napoleonshöhe, where the fountains played merrily all day long. Picnics, excursions, garden-fêtes took the place of dinners, balls, receptions ; conventionalities were relaxed while society ran riot in a sort of pseudo-Arcadian simplicity among the smiling valleys and wooded hills of Hesse. To the French there was the charm of novelty in the little German villages with their fruit-trees, their church-spires, their thatched roofs, and their painted houses ; no spot was left unexplored, from the high Meissner to the valley of the Fulda.

General Duclos had chosen for his wife a charming villa at the foot of the hills, nestling among the woods near Napoleonshöhe and not far from the picturesque village of Kirchedilmold on the old road from Cassel, and, though his military duties kept him much occupied, he found time to be with her frequently enough. Among the promoters of merriment she was not the least, and many river-parties, picnics, and explorations were undertaken with her guidance. But best of all she loved to ride, delighting in her perfect horsemanship, and perhaps not unconscious that the close habit and broad hat with floating plumes became her admir-

ably. She arranged riding-parties to every point of interest far and near, and little isolated hamlets would often be roused in the lazy summer afternoons by the advent of a joyous cavalcade which merrily raided the rye-bread, cream, and fruit of some wayside cottage. Anaïs was the life of these excursions—almost a girl again in the free air and the sunshine, and soothed from trouble, passion, pain by the tender hand of Nature.

Strangely impressionable to outward things, she seemed to learn a new life in this contact with Nature, which she approached at once with the trained appreciation of a poet and the sense of novelty of one who had lived chiefly in towns. This knit a fresh bond between Ostenburg and herself, for it was his home,—the country through which they went,—the scene in which he had spent his boyhood ; and Anaïs found that beneath his polished cynicism lay a deep sympathy with Nature in all her moods. He showed her the streams along which he and Egon had wandered with their rods many years ago, the forests through which they had hunted ; he taught her to distinguish the notes of the thrush and nightingale, the foliage of the trees, the flight of the hawk or wood-pigeon—a thousand delightful things of country lore. She had no need to learn the charm of exquisite cloud-forms, the rich colouring of the long hill-folds, the shading of the forest-green, for her quick sense of the beautiful revelled in these almost more subtly than he could himself. She was happy, breathing a moment's respite and reassured by Ostenburg's loyal adherence to the very letter of his promise. There was, indeed, a difference in their relation since his outburst, for, tuned to the highest pitch that day, it was impossible to sink afterwards to the level of ordinary acquaintance, but

they found a possibility of continuing their intercourse in a respectful intimacy which was almost that of a brother and sister, or of cousins that were devoted friends. Heinz had acknowledged his love and spoken it ; henceforth there could be no compliment from him to Anaïs, not the most superficial gallantry, without infringing her express commands. Between friend and friend all should be simple and direct, and so it was : he was chivalrous, she at once frank and reserved, and both trusted that they had honourably attained the solution of the problem set them by a cruelly ironical fate. Ostenburg's love was strong as ever, but he realised the hopelessness of it, believing, happily for her peace, that Anaïs felt for him no more than friendship.

Anxiety or pain seemed far from the merry cavalcade which galloped through a sun-dappled glade of the forest on a July afternoon. Anaïs rode first between Heinz and Fritz von Barby, her Arab's mane tossing, her long plumes floating in the wind ; a few steps behind came the General, hugely happy in this holiday from official duties, in attendance upon Madame de Monticourt ; Veronika, her ruddy hair shining in the sun, was escorted by Egon and Monsieur de Brisserat ; four or five other gentlemen and ladies completed the party.

Presently, where the forest broke away into open hillside and revealed the blue distances beyond, Anaïs reined in her horse and looked rapturously across the country.

" Oh, to be an outlaw ! " she sighed. " To live for ever in the greenwood with horse and hound ! What a gallop that was ! What a view ! Why do we live in towns ? "

"Don't you think, Madame, that when the winter came you would regret Cassel and your charming house?" asked Heinz, with a smile. "The greenwood is less attractive in December."

"Oh no, no!" she cried impetuously. "It must be beautiful always! I should like the trees bowed down with snow, and the bare branches, and the cold, pale colour. No; I'm not a fair-weather friend! Don't you remember the day when we were caught out in the rain? I never saw anything so lovely as that—the silver mist that came over everything, and the clear drops on every leaf, and the rainbow at last! I should like to have a little cottage, just here, or down near that pretty village with the spire. What is its name, Freiherr?"

He told her and, with a hand stretched towards the horizon, showed her valley, tower, and height, with a legend, a tradition attached to each.

"You know it like a book!" broke out young Fritz.

"We are not many miles from Ostenburg, and I used to ride over every yard of this country when I was a boy. Those hills to the left are on my land."

"And where is Ostenburg?" asked Anaïs, following the direction of his eyes.

"You see that fold in the hills, Madame? To the left of a spire and a clump of trees! Just beyond that stands the house, hidden by the rising ground. We have no view this way, but to the north it is all open, and one sees the country for miles. It's a fine situation."

"Every corner is charming here," said Anaïs enthusiastically.

There was regret in her eyes as she looked across to the place which should have been her home. In her

present mood to have lived among these hills would have been paradise, even without the love that had been her happiness and was her sorrow.

Meanwhile the rest of the party had assembled round her with cries of admiration at the prospect and merry laughter. "What shall we do next?" was the question. Some suggested returning by the way they had come and taking refreshment at a cottage beyond the forest; others proposed descending to the village and going home by another and rather longer road.

"I have a plan!" said Heinz. "If all the horses are good for another mile, let us go on to one of my farms, where I hope you will accept my hospitality. The farmer's wife is renowned for her cream, and Madame Duclos shall taste the delights of real rustic life!"

The plan was joyfully acclaimed, and they rode on down the hillside and through the village—a brave sight to the children playing in the street. Presently, through corn-fields and meadows where the lazy cattle grazed, they reached the farm—a low, deep-eaved building, yellow in the afternoon sun. The clatter of hoofs and the furious barking of a dog chained in the yard brought the comely farmer's wife to the door, a wondering child clinging to her skirt on either side.

"*Ach*, it is the Herr Freiherr!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "This is indeed an honour! And the gracious Frau Freifrau was here, too, only this morning, to see the cows!"

Heinz dismounted and, with a flattering reference to her housekeeping, explained the object of their visit. The woman beamed with pleasure and hastened forward to show them in; but Anaïs, who had sprung from her horse with the joyful aid of Fritz, begged that they

might remain out-of-doors. Heinz was eager to satisfy her whim, and it appeared that there were chairs and a rough table in the orchard, though the hostess did not consider this rustic accommodation so fitting for the gracious ladies and gentlemen as that of the house. But Anaïs would not be withstood ; the farmer's wife was soon won to acquiescence by her charming manner and her kindness to the blue-eyed children, one of whom, it seemed, was Ostenburg's godson.

The horses were led away by eager farm-lads who stared open-mouthed at the Herr Freiherr and his fine guests, and the housewife summoned her elder daughter, a red-cheeked girl of fifteen, to lead the distinguished company to the orchard, while she herself bustled off to provide for their entertainment. But this did not suit Anaïs, who wished to play the game in earnest and, somewhat to the scandal of the good housewife, the ladies followed her to the kitchen and dairy, making merry over the cutting of bread and butter, the pouring of cream into big bowls, and the setting out of strawberries which the children had brought from the wood in great baskets. It was Anaïs who spread the table with damask—coarse indeed but white as snow—while the men carried from the house chairs that were, they swore, clean enough to serve as plates ; it was she who, when the feast was ready, brought the dish of strawberries to set in the midst—the crowning luxury of their Arcadian revel—and it was she who served them, laughing and talking in the highest spirits.

“ I am a very baby for strawberries ! ” she cried, as she piled the plates. “ Monsieur de Barby, you shall cut the bread for those who will not have it with butter ! ”

They were a merry party, in the humour to delight in trifles. The farm, the fare, the antics of the chained watch-dog, the lithe grace of a tabby-cat stalking the foolish chickens in the yard, all were good enough to set banter flowing and to unseal the springs of laughter. The apple-trees arched their branches above, and the sun, golden for the close of day, shone athwart them, dappling the short, sweet grass below ; the breeze was just strong enough to rustle the leaves and to lift the plumes of the ladies' hats—one could not have chosen a more perfect scene. Presently Anaïs espied the two children watching them ; she called them to her side and filled their hands with strawberries, questioning them as to their age and learning, and smiling over the gravity of their answers. Heinz, willing to fall in with her mood, made the eyes of his godson round with a silver-piece.

“ What will you do with it ? ” he asked, seeing the child turn it over and over in delight.

“ Buy everything I want, Herr.”

“ Everything ! What sort of things ? ”

“ Oh, a horse, and a sword, and a trumpet, and a cap like the soldier wore that came here the other day.”

“ Oh, so you want to be a soldier ! ” said Anaïs, smiling. “ That ’s right ; the Herr Freiherr will be pleased with that, because he is one also. And you,” she asked, turning to his brother ; “ if I give you a silver-piece, what will you do with it ? ”

“ Buy all the pedlar’s books next time he comes—the ones with the fine pictures, gracious lady.”

“ So you ’re to be learned ? ” she said. “ Well, that ’s a good ambition too, so here ’s your silver-piece ! And now you can go back and show them to your mother.”

The children ran away, bewildered as much by the charm of the beautiful lady as by the untold wealth which was theirs.

“How happy we should be if we could satisfy all our ambition with a silver coin!” said Madame Duclos, with a little sigh. “So much for childhood!—Freiherr, they are dear little fellows! You must see that this godson of yours makes a good soldier.”

“Such military ardour should certainly be encouraged,” he replied.

The farmer’s wife was overjoyed when, later, Ostenburg offered to provide for the education of the boy; she did not know that this sudden interest was owed to the chance words of the French lady who had invaded her dairy that afternoon.

Jest followed jest across the table at lightning speed, and laughter echoed through the orchard. The General talked of Provençal vineyards while the strawberries were discussed, and gave his enthusiastic vote to the northern fruit. Heinz, with memories of Italy, enlisted in the cause of the grape and quoted Horace.

“Neither Latin nor wine to-day!” Anaïs cut him short. “We are Arcadians! In milk will we drink the health of our host.”

She lifted her glass; her example was followed, and joyous approbation honoured the toast. Heinz seized the spirit of the moment, and thanked them in an impromptu speech that sparkled with wit and good-humoured references to the tastes and tempers of his guests.

“But this is poor hospitality to so noble a company,” he ended. “May I some day hope to welcome you all

beneath my own roof? It should have been to-day, but the road was too far. Mesdames, Messieurs, I ask you to spend a few days very soon at Ostenburg!"

The invitation was accepted on the spot, and Heinz pictured in glowing colours the drives, rides, excursions to be made from his home. To the men he offered shooting, to the ladies a ball. He gave the warmth of affection to his account, and set them all on fire to see the great house and its surroundings; but behind the fun and high spirits of his words there was a deeper wish, almost a painful one: that Anaïs should at least once cross the threshold of his home, that he might see her once in the place where she should have ruled. The thing came into her mind, too, and as she laughingly accepted the invitation she knew that it would be an ordeal, even while curiosity pricked her to the desire to go.

"And have you no legend, no ghost-story?" asked Madame de Monticourt.

"If you chose to linger in the great hall at midnight, perhaps you might behold a duel between two gentlemen—the one dressed in black, the other in red. He of sable garb uses an inlaid rapier, and it is he who after a desperate encounter lays low his enemy. Thereupon a lovely lady rushes in and falls beside the prostrate man with a shriek of agony, and all is swept away from your sight."

"Is it true, Freiherr?" asked Veronika. "I have heard the story before."

Ostenburg's eyes were unreadable.

"Who knows—who knows, Fräulein?" he said. "It is a fact that the dearest friend of one of my ancestors married a lovely wife, and that in our hall a duel was fought between the men. Also it is true that

an inlaid rapier and a lady's glove were found beneath the floor when some repairs were made."

"But have you never seen it yourself?" asked Anaïs, looking up.

He shook his head.

"No, Madame. The tradition goes that if an Ostenburg sees it, it portends a violent death—or dishonour. But why believe these old wives' tales?" he queried, laughing, as if afraid he had spoken too earnestly. "I take them for what they are worth—as part of one's inheritance. For the rest—" He snapped his fingers.

"Your legends are too grim for Arcady," burst in Veronika. "You should tell them when we stay with you at Ostenburg—at dusk, before a crackling fire."

"Yes; when ladies quiver at the rustle of a leaf and glance fearfully behind them! You deserve some terrible tales, Fräulein Veronika, and I will lay up a store. But," he added more gravely, "I must beg you not to mention that story of the duel to my mother; she is old-fashioned, and has a firm faith in our traditions. I know you will respect it."

By this time the bowl of strawberries had been plundered and the big loaves diminished; everyone rose from the table and scattered through the orchard in little groups, the ladies gathering the daisies that studded the grass and giving them as favours to the men. Fritz besought one from the hand of Anaïs; Heinz had a like treasure bestowed with a merry frankness that forbade coquetry, and Veronika, besieged by three or four at once—the General amongst them—chose him and Egon as the recipients of her decorations. The all-absorbing game was being played as eagerly as ever, though the change of scene deluded

the players into the belief that they had left all that savoured of civilisation behind, forgetful that shepherds sighed for nymphs even in Arcady.

Meanwhile the mellow light had changed to orange, and through the apple-trees one saw a sky glowing of red and purple. Someone reluctantly suggested return, and young Fritz was sent to call for the horses. Very slowly the company strolled towards the farm, lingering to admire the sunset and to watch the moving lights and colours of earth and sky. Anaïs waited long by the orchard gate, and looked back regretfully.

“ ‘ I, too, have been in Arcadia ! ’ ” she quoted softly. “ Ah, why must we leave it ? ”

Heinz, who was beside her, read her thought, and said :

“ The world’s childhood knew not many of our present joys, Madame ; just as our own infancy is ignorant of life’s truest pleasures.”

“ Ignorant, too, of its sorrows,” she rejoined. “ I wonder—I wonder—— ”

“ Whether the pleasure is worth the pain ? A thousand times yes, Madame ! ”

Her eyes wore that strange look of sadness that had come to them ever since the days when she had looked into the eyes of death ; a moment later it had passed, and she was laughing as she gathered up the reins on her horse’s neck and nodded to the farmer’s wife, who stood curtsying low to each of the gallant company, radiant with the Herr Freiherr’s liberal payment of her hospitality. She watched them disappear down the lane, and returned to her kitchen, marvelling at the strange tastes of ladies and gentlemen who might, if they chose, be served off silver by finely liveried

lackeys in their grand houses. Pleasure is, after all, merely a question of point of view.

The west grew more brilliant and faded like a fire from which the life has died ; the crescent moon rose with a star in its sickle and sent rays of silver light through the interlaced branches of the forest ; the eastern sky darkened to the hue of a sapphire. Presently someone trolled out the chorus of a well-known song from some opera, the rest joined in, and the sound started the echoes of the sombre forest alleys. From one song they passed to another ; the General gave a Provençal ballad in his full voice, Egon warbled an ancient *Volkslied*, sentimental as the moonlight, and Brisserat, in a fit of patriotic ardour, broke into : "*Partant pour la Syrie.*" So they sang through the wood until a duet of nightingales made them listeners and subdued their gaiety to low murmurs. Egon rode by Veronika, happy in her tenderer mood, Madame de Monticourt lingered behind, flirting with Brisserat, and the General, pushing his horse beside that of his wife, bent over and whispered in her ear. Heinz saw it in the moonlight and, knitting his brow, rode moodily alone. Why was such a right not his ? Why was he denied all that the nightingale's song awoke in his heart ? Surely Fate was so cruel that he had a right to defy her !

CHAPTER XV

ANNA'S FAINTS

IT was arranged that in the following week Heinz should drive his friends to Ostenburg on his own coach. He rode over some days before to prepare the Freifrau for the invasion, and to see that everything was arranged and the rooms suitably apportioned. It was really for one guest alone that he was anxious : his queen was for the first time to sanctify the old house by her presence, to enter through that gate which she might have passed as a bride. He wished that it might show her a smiling face, lest its sombre gloom should oppress or repel her, and he suggested that her room should be one overlooking the lake, with a sunny window and a view of blue hills in the distance—the room he had chosen and furnished for her boudoir years before. Would she care, he wondered ? Women forget easily, and she was too natural, too friendly with him that he should even dream that she loved him. He had gauged her, he believed : a woman with more intellect than heart, or at least with a heart deadened by all she had suffered ; cold enough and fond enough of admiration to be an accomplished coquette without fear of hurting herself, but capable too of being a man's friend and a true one ; exquisite in every grace of mind and spirit, but passionless. It was best so, and his love seemed less blameworthy in the belief that it would

never be returned. Yet, even so, Anaïs might be moved at seeing the house of which she should have been mistress.

The Freifrau rejoiced to see her son and reproached him for his infrequent visits. With a sense of guilt he pleaded his duties as the King's aide-de-camp, feeling all the while that her quick eyes would pierce his hypocrisy, would guess the woman who had come between them. She heaped coals of fire on his head by welcoming the thought of his guests and throwing herself heartily into schemes for their entertainment. It was fitting that the Freiherr von Ostenburg should be hospitable, and she entirely approved of his inviting some country neighbours to dine on one of the three nights that his town friends would be there. She was also pleased that Frau von Barby had been included in the invitation as company for herself and as chaperon to Veronika, only hesitating a little at the propriety of asking a lady to the house of the man she had refused. Heinz reassured her as to the completeness of his friendship with Fräulein von Barby and her forgetfulness of his proposal. He touched off portraits of the other visitors, mentioning Anaïs quite casually as one of the acknowledged beauties of the residence, and speaking of her warm friendship for Veronika. The mother and son passed a happy evening together, discussing politics, people, and books, as was their wont, and next morning she bade him happily farewell, promising that his guests should have no fault to find with the hospitality of Ostenburg.

The day fixed for the drive dawned bright and cloudless. The coach was gay with muslin dresses and broad summer hats, and the four thoroughbreds chafed at their bits in impatience to start, while some of the

younger men who had chosen to ride hovered round, exchanging snatches of conversation with the ladies. There was the usual reluctance to take the best seats ; but it was at last decided that the newly married wife of one of the French officers, Madame de Jarnac, should occupy the place of honour beside Ostenburg, while the rest arranged themselves amicably as best might be. Heinz would have chosen another companion, but choice was impossible, and the young Frenchwoman was sweet and lively enough—enthusiastic, too, in a girlish way that made him smile.

The spirited horses flew along the fruit-bordered roads, clattering merrily past houses and villages as if they, too, enjoyed the sport ; the chirp of grasshoppers in the fields sounded through the warm air ; a soft breeze fluttered the feathers and ribbons of the ladies. Presently the party halted to discuss a lunch of fruit and cakes in the shadow of the trees, and when they set forward again Heinz found that Fate had been kind and placed Anaïs at his side. Evidently their destination had no weight on her spirits, he thought, finding her in her most sparkling mood—neither gentle nor poetically inclined, but prodigal of bitter-edged epigrams that quickened his intellect to admire, even while his heart was pained. A preconceived idea will blind even the most sympathetic penetration, and he never observed that her brilliance to-day was rather forced. She was shrinking from the ordeal,—for an ordeal it was,—though the day before she had been all eagerness for it ; she knew that her strength would be taxed to the uttermost : neither word nor glance must betray an interest more than common.

They were on Ostenburg's land now ; the cottagers came to their doors to curtsy to him, and Anaïs

remarked on their prosperous looks and on the fertility of the ground.

"My mother's doing," he told her. "I have been away more than is right for a landed proprietor, but she has a man's head for business—indeed better than many a man's!—and a genius for order and detail which I have not inherited. It is her happiness, and so I feel the less compunction in following my profession."

Anaïs was all eyes and ears now as he showed her this or that point of interest, illustrated by a tradition, a hunting-tale, or an anecdote of his own boyhood—the last told half apologetically, with an appeal to Egon riding by the side of the coach. She grew silent, encouraging him to talk; and they drove on, past a bend of wooded hill, and turned at last into a long avenue arched with high beeches.

"In a moment you will see the house," Heinz explained, whipping up the horses; and even as he spoke a sharp twist of the avenue revealed the grey building enclosing a court on three sides. The central portion was the oldest, he said: the remains of the feudal castle—the wings had been added in the eighteenth century and the whole front restored. The horses' hoofs clattered on stone paving as they drew up before the door; Heinz put his whip in the socket and laid down the reins, ready to help Madame Duclos to descend. But, when he turned to her, he gave a cry to see her white and motionless: she had fainted.

There was a confusion of pity and murmurs about the heat. The General fussily leaped from his seat and stood to receive Anaïs from Heinz's arms; the ladies were ready with scent and handkerchiefs, while Frau von Ostenburg, who had come to the head of the

steps to welcome her guests, despatched a maid for remedies, and laid Anaïs on the sofa of an antechamber with characteristic promptitude, calming the distracted General with a few cheerful words. Veronika stayed with her, but Heinz, hiding his own solicitude, had to hasten into the hall, reassure his other guests, and lead them into the drawing-room. It was not very long before the Freifrau followed, ushering in Anaïs on her husband's arm—a little pale, but quite recovered. Frau von Ostenburg's natural scorn of a fainting woman had been softened by Anaïs's spirit when she revived, and she was already prejudiced in her charming visitor's favour. All formality of reception or introduction had been prevented by the accident, and Heinz now presented to his mother those of the new arrivals whom she did not know, hastening, as soon as the little ceremony was over, with anxious inquiries to the sofa where the General had placed Anaïs.

"Really, I never thought I should be so foolish!" she said, smiling away his anxiety. "The sun was very hot. It has affected me in that way before; one minute I am well, and the next—quite away! Frau von Ostenburg was so kind! I must apologise for such an unfortunate arrival."

The explanation was perfectly natural, perfectly plausible. No one need ever guess the emotion which had gripped at her heart like an icy hand, overcoming mind and consciousness. There should be no more of such folly! She talked on bravely until, a few minutes later, the company dispersed to dress for dinner.

The atmosphere of the house was strange to Anaïs: the formality and stateliness which regulated everything, the ancient furniture, the vaulted chamber,

armour-hung, in which they dined—all these things seemed to her excited imagination to savour of romance rather than of reality, and she felt in some enchanted castle of which she had read long ago. Something of the stateliness of the house, too, seemed to have fallen upon Heinz von Ostenburg as he sat in the seat of his ancestors,—a kind of gravity which he threw aside in the gay Westphalian Court,—and the conversation, carried on in German out of deference to the Freifrau, was more serious than usual. One could not be frivolous in that gloomy room with the heavy shadows on the window and the lingering memory of long-dead generations! And yet the gravity charmed Anaïs more than it repelled her, just because it belonged to the man she loved.

After dinner they strolled out on the terrace to admire the view and the last fires of sunset, and then someone asked whether they might not see part, at least, of the treasures of the house. The armoury, rich with the spoils of warrior forbears, was visited first, and Heinz was able to display his full knowledge of every weapon, every piece of mail: this was the relic of a Crusader, that of a young son of the house who had fallen in the Thirty Years' War, that again a sword which had seen service in far lands, the property of a restless, good-for-nothing Ostenburg who had shed his blood in strangers' quarrels, and had at last laid his bones on the moors of Culloden.

"I have sympathy with him," Heinz said, handling the blade with a sort of tenderness. "He was a gallant fellow, only not to be bound by rules and conventions; in all his adventures and misfortunes he always gained respect and kept his honour unstained. I think he has bequeathed something of his restlessness to me!"

"I like him too," said Anaïs softly. "Women are tender to prodigals, you know! What was his name? I want to remember him."

"It was my own, Madame! There has been a Heinz in every generation."

"And that inlaid sword?" asked Madame de Monticourt eagerly. "Is that the one of which you told us? I may ask as the Freifrau is not here."

"Yes, Madame! That is the one. I'll take it down for you to see."

"How beautiful!" cried Anaïs, touching it daintily. "Ah, but there is blood on the blade!"

"It was found so, and I did not wish to have it cleaned," said Heinz, with sudden gravity. For all his scepticism it seemed that the legend affected him more than he would have chosen to say. He replaced the sword and led them from the armoury.

They passed through long passages and suites of reception-rooms—full of objects of interest from the portraits on the walls to the embroidered cushions worked by patient fingers centuries before; they climbed a winding staircase leading to an ancient tower, whence the wide, moonlit view spread before their eyes; they saw the bedchamber where Gustavus Adolphus had slept. Anaïs was entranced and forgetful of fatigue in the interest of the pages of history which were unrolled to her eyes. Heinz was quick to see her attention and at last spoke for her alone, colouring and enriching the past records with all his powers of language and all the charm of his musical voice. He was voted the most perfect cicerone.

At last he opened a door into a long, well-lit corridor, dismissing the servants who had attended with lights through the older parts of the house.

"This is the last," he said. "It is here that I have arranged my bronzes—my special collection."

It was certainly a magnificent one—enviable by many a connoisseur; Ostenburg had begun it in Italy, and still added to it from time to time as occasion offered. Anaïs was perhaps the only one of the guests who could fully appreciate it, and she lingered behind, delighting Heinz by the justness of her criticisms.

"But we ought not stay," she said at last. "Look! the others are growing impatient. You must let me come again to-morrow."

"Whenever you please!" He paused, then asked her very gently: "You are not tired, Madame? You are quite well again? I feel that I was to blame in driving you through the heat of the day."

She assured him of her perfect restoration—a little hurriedly it seemed to him—and as she raised her eyes to his face he caught in their depths a fleeting expression, sad with the unutterable sadness of unshed tears, that struck through at his heart. Was she, after all, not so indifferent? he asked himself. Did she feel something of his agony in this house? Her swoon—not only the sun—impossible! She was asking him some question about the bronzes quite coolly; he was a fool! And yet—to see her here was enough to turn any man's brain.

They returned to the drawing-room, where Frau von Ostenburg awaited them with coffee in cups of exquisite china, and commenting to her and Frau von Barby on the treasures of the house, the talk fell on miniatures, of which it seemed that Madame de Monticourt had a fine collection.

"You would perhaps like to see ours?" asked the Freifrau courteously. "My son, open the cabinet!"

Heinz obeyed and brought out a drawer full of miniatures for the lady's inspection. The rest crowded round and the pictures passed from hand to hand with many questions and comments. Some were very old—daughters of the house who had been young in the Thirty Years' War, sons who had died in battle, old men whose voices had been strong in camp and senate—many of them recognised from the oil-paintings already seen by the guests, and all with something in their grey eyes of the look which had fallen upon Heinz. The Freiherr referred all questions to his mother, who had the history of every portrait at her finger-tips and loved to dwell on the ancient splendour of the family.

"And who is this gentleman in scarlet?" asked Anaïs, holding up a miniature in a leather case. "He is very like Monsieur your son! Has he no story?"

The old lady spoke gravely and sadly.

"He is the Freiherr Wilhelm, Madame, the one man who brought a stain on our shield. It is a tale better forgotten. The miniature used to be hidden, but my son took it out to complete the collection."

Heinz bent over Madame Duclos's chair, saying in a low voice :

"It is the hero of the duel; but do not say you know the story, it would distress my mother. As I told you, it concerned a woman, the wife of his dearest friend."

Anaïs made a sign of comprehension. She saw that the Freifrau felt a past disgrace as keenly as if it had been a personal injury—how sternly inflexible would she be towards a lapse in her beloved son! Heinz was as firmly bound to honour by the traditions of his house as she herself by loyalty to her husband; his love came before her in a new light.

Madame de Monticourt had already discussed the

technical merits of another and more modern tray of miniatures—Ostenburg's father, mother, uncles, and cousins—and now was uttering cries of delight over a drawer containing quaint old relics of past generations, jewels and the like.

“What a curious ring!” she exclaimed presently. “It must be very old.”

“It was the betrothal-ring of a certain Anna von Ostenburg who lived in the sixteenth century,” the Freifrau explained. “I believe it to be—to have been unique.”

Everyone wished to look at it; and when it came into Veronika's hands she remembered the ring which she had found in Madame Duclos's cabinet and for the care of which she had guessed some sentimental reason. This was in every respect its counterpart: the peculiar design could not be mistaken. Looking up, she surprised a strange, questioning expression on the face of Heinz, a blush on that of Anaïs, and with a sudden flash of illumination she trembled, apprehending she knew not what.

Ostenburg could not withhold that questioning glance. He had let the ring be fashioned for Anaïs in the first days of their betrothal, and had put it on her finger the day he left Paris. She had sworn to keep it always; did she remember? She remembered only too well, and there sprang into her eyes a sort of appeal when she saw that Heinz understood. There was an unbroken bond between them—the bond of that memory which no one else shared, the bond of a common deceit in hiding that memory from the world. In that moment she wished that she had told her husband the whole truth. Perhaps then this would not weigh so heavily on her spirit, perhaps then she need not fear

continually that an accident might betray her secret ! Why should such little things remind her of it ? Just the mention of a ring—what was that ? Yet it had forged a new link in the chain between Heinz and herself.

For the rest of the evening she avoided him and devoted herself to the Freifrau, who found her prejudice against Frenchwomen melting away. Madame Duclos was a superior woman, she decided : a woman of breeding and heart—far different from such mere butterflies as Madame de Monticourt. On her side Anaïs was strongly attracted. The mother of Heinz stood beyond the rest of the world, of course ; but, apart from this, her unerring intuition pierced the German lady's reserve and found the heart beating true, if sternly, beneath. She understood the close union between mother and son and, as Heinz kissed the Freifrau's hand when the ladies retired for the night, she saw that it stood beyond mere caresses. The sight gave her strength ; it should not be through her that such a tie was broken ! Why had this mere idle talk of rings drawn closer the invisible thread that twined her life with that of Heinz ? She steeled herself to meet the new and questioning glance with which he bade her good-night, but felt that her face flushed involuntarily beneath it. Her task grew harder ; but to-morrow she would do better, for the sake of the Freifrau and of Ostenburg.

Heinz's heart was in a tumult. To-night Anaïs had seemed changed : no longer cold, heartless, but troubled, and by turns pale and blushing. Had she kept his ring ? Was she not so indifferent, after all ? Might he read love for himself in her agitation ? Alas ! he was not chivalrous or unselfish enough in his worship of the beloved woman to desire that it might not be so.

CHAPTER XVI

CONCERNING EGON AND VERONIKA

THE next morning, having risen early to shake off the restlessness that oppressed him, Heinz met the Freifrau on the terrace long before his guests were astir. The clear sky gave promise of another perfect day, and, as they walked up and down together, they discussed the best direction for the ride which he had planned as that morning's entertainment. From the ride the conversation drifted to their visitors, and the Freifrau, open and decided, summed up her opinion of each in a few pointed words. It was hard for Heinz to hear his mother's approbation of Anaïs—hard, because it only set the woman he loved higher than before and made her seem more worthy of worship.

"The General is not her equal in any respect," continued the Freifrau. "I wonder what can have induced so refined a woman to marry him! One can easily see that she is of the ancient *noblesse*!"

"I thought that you would like her," Heinz rejoined in a low voice.

"And I am more than ever regretful about you and Veronika von Barby," pursued the old lady. "The girl has marvellously improved. She is uncommon in every way and will be a very noble woman."

"A very noble wife for Egon," Heinz said with a smile. "Don't you see, *Frau Mutter*, how he adores her?"

"She is too good for him—too clever! Egon has nothing brilliant about him."

"But a heart of gold. I think you're wrong: he is good enough for her, and I believe she will marry him in the end!"

The arrival of Egon himself on the terrace put an end to their discussion, and presently the other guests assembled, enthusiastic over the beauty of the morning and ready to pursue any plan that their host proposed.

It was still early when the horses were brought, and in the highest spirits the party set out, too merry to observe that Madame Duclos was less brilliant than usual. It did not, however, escape Ostenburg, nor did he fail to notice that she deliberately avoided finding herself alone with him—a thing she had never done before. In the cooler mood of morning he hardly dared think what it might mean, and he tried to throw himself whole-heartedly into the office of cicerone, and to make his guests appreciate to the full the beauties of his home. They rode through wood, meadow, and heath, now by the side of a little brook, now scaling a hill. Presently, when the sun grew hot, they reached a clearing where the servants had prepared a luncheon that did credit to the Freifrau's housekeeping, and then, having discussed it with good appetites, they rode slowly home. It was too early to dress for dinner and the party broke up, some preferring to rest, others choosing the open air. Madame Duclos pleaded fatigue and went to her room with a book that Heinz chose for her from the library. As she mounted the stairs Veronika ran after her impulsively.

"Shall I come and read to you?" she asked.

"I am not going to deprive other people of your company," said Anaïs, who had seen Egon wandering

anxiously round the hall. "No, you had better go out; I have a headache and I shall be best alone. Come and see me before you dress for dinner."

She stretched up to kiss her taller friend and went lightly up the stairs; Veronika, turning, found herself face to face with Egon.

"Are you coming out with me?" she asked sweetly.

"If you will let me," he said glowing.

"Wait till I change my habit, then." And she ran up to reappear very soon in a light summer dress, with a broad hat tied over her gorgeous hair—a sight to please more critical eyes than Egon's.

"Where shall we go?" he asked, opening the door for her.

"You know this place better than I. Herr von Ostenburg says that you were always here when you and he were boys."

"Shall I take you to the other side of the lake, then?"

She agreed, and they set off leisurely over the short turf to the right of the avenue. She kept the ball of conversation rolling merrily, inconsequently—teasing a little as she used to in the old days before she was grown up. He followed her lead with his slower brain, happy to be alone with her, happy for the pleasure she showed in recalling incidents of the time when he had known her as a child. Dared he speak the thing that lay at his heart? A dozen times he had essayed it, a dozen times she had foiled him, or his courage had failed. Could he aspire to this superb creature who, for a word, might have been Freifrau von Ostenburg, who might now choose between two or three of the best matches, both French and German, in Cassel—he, a poor Captain in the Bodyguard? He at least loved

her better than anyone else could do, and Madame Duclos, who favoured him, had bidden him have patience.

They went on over the sunny grass to the shelter of the trees that fringed the lake, then followed its bank till they came to a place where the trees broke away and the water lapped up to the moss at their feet. Veronika sank down on a stone and looked over at the reflection of herself in the dark mirror of the lake, then turned her laughing eyes back to Egon.

"It's pleasant here," she sighed happily. "How I do love a wood!"

"This one is heaven to me now," he replied, sitting down on the moss at her feet.

"Heaven could hardly be more beautiful," she said lightly, looking up at the canopy of sunlit leaves.

"But you know what I mean," he persisted, unable to be silent any longer. "Veronika, this time you shall listen to me! You know—you must have guessed—that I love you better than all the world."

She made an impatient movement, but he caught her hand and forced her to stay beside him.

"This time you shall listen, Veronika," he repeated, growing courageous by the earnestness of his resolve. "I have no fine speeches to make to you, but I want you to believe that I love you—and, oh! I know that you are far, far above me, but they say that love sometimes brings forth love, and, dearest, I want you to be my wife."

She turned and faced him, in her eyes at once tenderness, regret, and hesitation. She had rehearsed this scene in her mind over and over again, knowing that it must come sooner or later, and in imagination it had been easy to appear at once firm and kind, so sure had she been that Egon was not the right man; but now

his broken words, his pleading eyes, influenced her more than she had guessed possible. They made her afraid of herself, because for an instant it seemed so simple to say the "yes" for which they implored her, even while her brain repeated that he was not the right man. With the memory of Ostenburg's proposal still upon her, she had indeed confessed to Anaïs that she would ask no more than real love of the man she could accept, but since then she had changed her mind, and had in all calmness made the decision that she could never marry one who was her inferior in intellect. She must not let mere impulse and the force of Egon's declaration overrule such a decision to the misery of both, she told her throbbing heart a little defiantly ; she must steel herself to the strangely troubled feeling that shook her judgment and seemed to persuade her to yield.

"I am very sorry, Egon," she said at last. "Why do you think so much of me? We have always been such good friends."

"And we should be friends still, only dearer, truer——"

"No, Egon. It's something quite different. You and I—our tastes, our pleasures, are not the same. You don't care for the books I do!"

"Books!" he broke in scornfully. "What have they got to do with life?"

"But they have! Difference does not matter in friends, but between husband and wife it would bring misery."

"Love takes no account of difference."

"But—but I don't love you in the way you want!"

He drew a deep breath and slowly let go her hand. He was too simple not to take her words quite honestly, quite plainly, too brave to betray his pain by more than

an unconscious tension of his face. She had risen, feeling perhaps more mistress of herself and of the situation standing, and he rose too.

"Will you answer one question?" he asked her quietly.

He could have chosen no better way of winning her favour than this reticence; her own high-bred courage recognised his and admired it; never had she liked him better, never had he so nearly touched her ideal of heroism. A quiet endurance of pain will always give dignity even to the simplest, and Veronika felt that in some way she had lost the position of superiority she had before held towards him.

"Ask me whatever you like!" she said, regretful that she must needs hurt this true heart.

"There is no one else?"

"No one else, Egon."

"Then I shall wait!" "And hope," his tone said.

"No, no! you must not go on thinking of me like that!" she cried hastily. "I shall never——"

"But I shall never love any other woman," he said, smiling gravely, and again she felt abased,—in the wrong; she had done him injustice in her thoughts.

"Ah, Veronika," he continued, "I could bear to be patient, to wait an eternity if it were not for so many others. Perhaps one of them will be more fortunate than I! They are richer, more distinguished."

She turned on him half fiercely.

"Do you, who profess to love me, think so meanly of me as to believe that I could marry a man for his wealth, his position? If I loved a man his poverty would make no difference, nor would his wealth if I did not love him!"

"That was not my meaning," he defended himself:

"but that to one of them, so much worthier of you than I, you might give your love."

She was very sorry for him, yet all the firmer because she feared lest pity and the strange emotion his words called up might lead her to yield. Moreover, she liked him very much indeed and could not forbear to like him the better for his new bearing, even while it half angered her that he should have the power to move and to trouble her.

"Perhaps I shall never marry at all," she told him, haughtily. "Women can be happy unmarried, though men will not think so. You need not be afraid of any of these people here!"

He could not doubt her candid grey eyes, and as long as he had no rival he dared hope; Madame Duclos had bidden him have patience.

"But oh," she sighed, "what a pity it all is! Why cannot we be just friends as we were before? I suppose it will all be different now, and I was so happy!"

"Why should it be different?" he asked. She admitted that his friendship had value in her eyes; his lover's hopefulness flashed high again. If only he were patient!

"Why? Because when a man has told a woman that he loves her, they can never speak to each other quite freely again—unless she loves him too."

"Then you will take away even your friendship?"

"I do not wish to—but you are not my friend any more."

"But if I promised to say no word that a friend might not say,—if we let everything be just the same?"

"Ah, that—if it were possible!"

"It is possible, Veronika."

"Then you promise?"

"I promise—unless you change your mind."

"One does not change one's mind," she said gravely. She was relieved that he seemed so reasonable, angry with herself for the impression that he had made on her.

"And now we must go home," she said, turning back through the wood.

He walked beside her, grave and saddened, hardly daring to look round at her gleaming hair, her splendid face. It was so hard to crush the hope on which he had fed for months past!

"And you are quite sure?" he asked when they parted in the hall.

"Quite, quite sure, Egon," she replied firmly; but as she ran up-stairs the tears were very near her eyes.

She went straight to Anaïs's room and found her friend on the sofa, reading or pretending to read.

"You have been out a long time," Madame Duclos said with a smile. "But what is wrong, dear? You look—more sorrowful than a girl should look on a June day with the prospect of a dance before her."

Veronika sank down on her knees by the couch and hid her face in her hands.

"I hate hurting people," she said brokenly, "and I have been forced to hurt the nicest man in the world."

A few anxious words from the elder woman brought forth her confession.

"What could I do?" she said. "I wish he had never spoken! I don't love him, I know that I don't; I wish he cared for me less!"

"And yet he fulfils your condition of loving you with all his heart. Have you changed your mind about that, Veronika?"

"Perhaps—perhaps I have," the girl whispered.

"I don't think I could live always with a man who cares so little for all the things I care for."

"And yet your face is wet with tears. You've hurt yourself as well as Egon, Veronika."

"Only because I'm sorry for him."

"But it would be very easy to change your decision; a word to-night! Come, let me say it for you! How happy he will be!"

"Oh, no, no! You are wrong. I am quite decided. He is not the right man."

Anaïs looked into her face, saying:

"You are sure?"

"He asked that too. Yes, I am quite sure. But I can't help being sorry—he took my answer so bravely and quietly."

Anaïs kissed her and said no more. She was wise enough not to press her further, or to plead Egon's cause too warmly, but she guessed more than the girl had told her and read hopefully her trouble, her regret; she did not yet despair of giving Veronika to the warm love which so patiently awaited her, knowing that Egon was the mate among all men for her friend.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DUTY OF A FREIHERR VON OSTENBURG

THE necessity for dressing separated the two friends, and Anaïs fell to musing on her own destiny while she submitted herself to the skilful hands of Toinette. The part she had chosen to play was a hard one, and her strength was unequal to the strain. In her own surroundings she had almost persuaded herself that she had ceased to regard Ostenburg other than as a dear friend, but here in his own home—the home where she should have reigned—the revolt against her lot grew fiercer and the endurance of it more intolerable. To yield would be so easy—so cruelly easy : to resist strained her faculties almost to breaking point ; but she must be brave, for the honour of the house of Ostenburg, and for the sake of the noble Freifrau, if not for gratitude and loyalty to Jean Duclos. Heinz must never guess the aching head, the throbbing pulse that were the price exacted for the struggle ; there must be no sign of agony for him to read, not a tremour in her voice, a glance in her eyes. She took a hand-glass and surveyed herself by its aid in the long mirror that stood near the window. Her cheeks, framed by the soft dark curls, were pale, but then she never had a high colour ; her eyes, fringed by the dark lashes, were bright as ever ; for the rest she was beautiful, with beauty heightened by the perfection of her

toilet, the brilliance of her jewels, and womanly vanity paused satisfied before the reflection ; she might wish that Heinz should not love her, yet that desire could not conquer her instinctive longing to appear beautiful in his eyes. It was a fatal and yet pardonable weakness: one to which she had yielded from the first moment of their meeting in Cassel. Anaïs could endure pain or privation bravely enough, this she was powerless to overcome.

A few moments later she swept into the drawing-room where the greater part of the guests had already assembled. The stately room lent itself with a kind of old-world dignity to the unwonted disturbance of company, and to Anaïs there was in this a certain fascination, as in all the aspects of the house which had stirred her so deeply. The dignity, the sobriety, the old-fashioned habits which had struck her on her arrival at Ostenburg, though so different from the surroundings of her own youth, were homelike to her—came to her, at least, with a sense of satisfaction, of repose. She glanced across at the Freiherr, standing beneath the carved mantelpiece with that new gravity upon him,—the shadow of the house,—and caught again at the full meaning of what it was to be head of the Ostenburgs. To her perhaps overwrought fancy it seemed a very noble and a very pleasing thing, one to which she would willingly have curbed her French vivacity, had Fate been kinder. Even as she talked with merry unconcern she saw how finely Heinz acquitted himself as host, how stately he looked beside his stately mother. Why was not her own place at his side ? The General, spruce, good-tempered, gallant in his best uniform, seemed a being of another and inferior world : in that moment she hated him for his inferiority.

Anaïs had the subtle intuition of a woman in gauging the man she loved. Heinz was in himself conscious of the change she had remarked ; he felt the weight of early associations, the spirit of a long line of ancestors. Cosmopolitan as he was, almost defiantly without spiritual country, and scornful of patriotism, he yet felt redoubled in this house that pride of race which was his heritage, and realised the responsibility of it. Only, different in this from Anaïs, he realised it chiefly as a good and splendid thing to lay at the feet of his beloved, understanding less clearly that his real responsibility required a fuller loyalty to the traditions of honour and uprightness which the house demanded of its sons. Now, as he greeted his neighbours one by one, it was not as individuals that he welcomed them, but as symbols of his position with regard to theirs—an Ostenburg welcoming those whose forefathers had been the friends of his own, whose children would be the friends of his successors. He looked across to Anaïs, wondering whether she would understand, and the full comprehension which he read as their eyes met seemed to increase the bitterness of their separation, and set his heart throbbing with the doubt which had troubled him the night before—whether she were not so indifferent as he had believed. If she were not, what was there to bind him ?

Anaïs, indeed, understood so well that when the Frenchman to whom she was talking made some low-voiced jest about the unfashionable attire of Ostenburg's guests, she disagreed and crushed him—to his great surprise, for Madame Duclos, conscious of her own supreme taste, was usually intolerant in such matters. The harmless remark had jarred, just because at the moment, for her as for Heinz, these people

were symbols, and symbols of a thing which she desired unutterably. After all, too, they were none of them ridiculous, and their disregard of fashion seemed in some way a part of their life and of what it represented; the elder women stately in severe black, the young girls sweet and simple in their muslins, the soldierly men—all had an indefinable air of breeding, of refinement, which spoke of long years of gentle descent. Among these, she knew, Ostenburg should have chosen a wife—had chosen one, in fact, if Veronika had not refused him; he had asked her to be Freifrau von Ostenburg, she had said, and it was indeed fitting that there should be a Freifrau von Ostenburg, the lady of the house and the mother of its sons. Anaïs pondered: yes, it was for her sake he had denied the old home its rights—for her sake, who could never be his wife. She must be strong, for him and for herself, and soon he would forget this—this folly, this unfortunate fancy. If she let him guess for an instant, if she wavered—but it was hard to act unconcern with the spell and the fascination of the house upon her.

She felt that spell all through the dinner, served with a certain orderly grandeur that was very impressive. Her neighbour on the one side was the Graf von Pustau, Léon's elder brother, who had taken her in to dinner; on the other sat one of the French officers. Acting on the impulse of her present mood she encouraged the Graf to speak of the history of the country, the connection between his family and that of Ostenburg. No better subject could she have chosen: Herr von Pustau was something of an antiquarian, and the interest of a woman in such things—a Frenchwoman, above all—both surprised and pleased him. Usually a

silent man, he could on occasion, and on his own subjects, be both agreeable and talkative, and Anaïs liked him for his resemblance to his younger brother ; he was a quiet, unenthusiastic gentleman, who had rallied to King Jerome rather to save himself from inconvenience than from any lack of patriotism, caring indeed little for the affairs of active life, and he told Madame Duclos as much, in the burst of confidence which her charm inspired. She smiled and passed off the dangerous ground : politics, at such a time, were best avoided unless one knew one's company, for the dislike to French rule was widely spread, and discontent surged under the apparent calm.

" 'This house beautiful ? ' " he said. " 'The situation ? I flatter myself that mine is at least as grand. You are interested in china ? I must ask Ostenburg to drive you over to-morrow. It 's only a matter of eight miles ! My wife would be delighted. I will speak to her about it, and we will arrange it with Ostenburg. ' "

Anaïs expressed her pleasure at the invitation and hoped it would be accepted.

" 'When we were boys we used to ride to and fro nearly every day, ' " continued Pustau. " 'Ostenburg and my brother were inseparable—featherbrained young scamps that they were ! I was of course a few years older, and perhaps more reasonable. You would n't think Ostenburg could be the same person if you had known him as a boy—the maddest, most reckless fellow, with a touch of genius, though ! And he 's turned out a fine man, after all—has got somewhat out of touch with us quiet country folk in the process ! It 's a pity he does not marry ! ' "

" 'Perhaps he may yet, Monsieur ! He is still young. ' "

"The Freifrau is bent upon it, and it is certainly the duty of a man in his position ; the next heir is only a cousin."

"There is a heavy responsibility in such a position," said Madame Duclos with a sigh. "It seems that one must be sacrificed to one's duty ! An estate is like a living thing to which one owes a debt. I used to feel that when I was a child ; if I had been a boy I should have been heir to a name as great as this, and I felt my sex as a sort of fault."

The Graf sighed.

"I have only two daughters," he said gravely.

"But you have a brother," Madame Duclos reminded him. "I, like Herr von Ostenburg, had none !"

"And that is why his duty is the more urgent," rejoined Pustau. "Perhaps you may have heard that a long while ago Ostenburg was betrothed to a French girl, a distant cousin. She died in the Revolution, and I believe that is the reason for his reluctance to marry."

"Do you blame him for this fidelity then, Monsieur ?"

"I think I do. A memory should not keep a man from his duty, and Heinz was an Ostenburg first of all. As you say, the old house has its rights !"

Anaïs bent her head ; she understood more clearly than ever, though Herr von Pustau did not know that he was giving his charming neighbour a deep and cruel lesson.

"I had not thought of it in that way," she said slowly. "You see, womanlike, I was taking the romantic view of the matter. But I think you are right !"

At this moment the Freifrau gave the signal for the ladies to retire, and presently, when coffee had been served and the gentlemen had rejoined them, a move was made to the great library, which had been cleared for dancing. Over everything hung the same pleasant orderliness, which subdued festivity to something befitting the house and yet obscured none of the merriment. The musicians were established in a gallery, and soon the strains of an old-fashioned country dance echoed between the panelled walls. Minuets, gavottes, *périgondines*, *schottisches*, were mingled with the newer waltz, and it was pretty to see the light muslin dresses of the young girls weaving the intricate figures of the dance. Rather to Madame Duclos's relief Heinz had many duty dances to perform, and when he came expectantly to her she could give him only one waltz. His face fell.

"Only one, Madame?" he asked reproachfully.

"The penalty of being host," she answered lightly, and he was forced to be content, for at that moment young Fritz, radiant with pleasure, came up to claim her hand for the gavotte that had just begun. The lad's admiration for his divinity flamed higher than ever, and was become a sort of jest in the more intimate circle. It had, however, done him good in its way, and between the desire to please Madame Duclos and to emulate Ostenburg, Fritz von Barby was growing a fine young officer.

Veronika was fêted to her heart's content; both old friends and new clamoured for dances, but she accorded two or three to Egon, just to show that there was to be between them that friendship which she had promised. He was a little graver than usual, she noticed, and she was touched by his obedience to her wishes in

avoiding all allusion to the events of the afternoon. She herself was quite calm now and not a little ashamed of her tears in Anaïs's room.

At last the moment came for which Ostenburg had waited impatiently and Madame Duclos with a sort of fear.

"Do you know that I have hardly spoken to you to-day, Madame?" he said as they began to dance.

"Is that so, Monsieur? Why, we rode together this morning!"

"But you avoided me. You rode with Brisserat, with Jarnac, with Fritz; and to-night——"

"To-night you had your duties of host to perform."

"At the Chamberlain's ball last week you saved three dances for me, though an unlucky chance made me late. Surely a friend has the right to ask as much! Have I offended you, Madame?"

"How should you? You make a great deal out of nothing, Freiherr! What perfect music it is!"

"You dance perfectly! Are you tired? Shall we stop here?"

They paused by a doorway leading on to the terrace, somewhat apart from the rest of the company.

"You might at least have compassion on me now," Ostenburg said. "All through dinner I had to entertain Frau von Pustau, who is not over lively, and Frau von Greissenburg, who is old."

"If Frau von Pustau be as agreeable as her husband, I cannot altogether pity you."

"You can make anyone talk! Pustau is usually quiet."

"I did not find him so. He told me much that was interesting about the history of this place, about the houses here."

"He is something of an antiquarian. What more did you discuss?"

"Among other things, you, Monsieur!" said Anaïs boldly, resolved to do the duty that seemed set before her.

"Me? I did not know, Madame, that you would have so far honoured me. Come outside and tell me about it! It is hot here."

He led her out on to the terrace before she could resist. The moonlight flooded it, and cast deep shadows from the balustrade and from the projecting parts of the house.

"What would I not have given to listen to what you said of me!" he murmured as they strolled along. "I watched you while I was supposed to be talking to Frau von Greissenburg, but I could not hear a word, though I saw how you were charming Pustau."

"You should have attended to your neighbour, Monsieur."

"Is n't it better worth while to look at you than to listen to the Greissenburg?" he said recklessly, resolved to penetrate the secret that tormented him.

He could endure uncertainty no longer. If she loved him, what did the world matter? She was superb to-night, too, with her throat like alabaster in the moonlight, her dazzling jewels.

"Hush!" she cried, quivering a little before his eyes. "You must be reasonable, Monsieur."

"Reasonable! You ask too much. But, since you command it — Tell me what you said of me to Pustau!"

"Herr von Pustau was blaming you, Monsieur."

"And did you defend me?"

"On the contrary; I agreed with him."

"Tell me in what I have offended!" he cried

eagerly. "I would rather be blamed by you than praised by anyone else."

Anaïs paused and traced with her finger a half-obliterated coat-of-arms carved on the balustrade : it reminded her of her task, and she did not mean to falter in it for all the spell of the moonlight.

"Herr von Pustau thinks that you have failed in your duty towards this house, towards your name," she said, looking Heinz full in the face. "It is his opinion that you should marry."

Heinz bit his lip and his brow darkened.

"That is a question on which I should certainly not ask Pustau's advice," he said curtly. "And you were cruel enough to agree with him, Madame?"

"I did agree with him, Monsieur. No ; you must listen to me, for I have something grave to say to you, something that must be said. Since I came here I have thought a great deal about this home of yours ; there seems to me a great dignity about such a home and such a position—the dignity that I remember in my own in the old days. This house with its old stories, and its marks of all those who have lived within it, and your stately mother moving through its rooms—it is not an inanimate thing, it is a person to whom you owe your life, your duty. You cannot be free from the responsibilities it lays upon you in return for the privileges it confers, any more than you can be free from the responsibility of life itself—you are, and you must be always, an Ostenburg as well as a man. When I saw you before dinner standing in the drawing-room, you had in some way changed—you were not yourself alone, but the representative of a long race—you were new to me."

He caught his breath.

" Ah, you understood all that ? " he cried. " Yes, when I met your eyes I knew that you understood, that you sympathised with me ! "

" I understood it so well," she rejoined gravely, " that when Herr von Pustau talked of you I knew he was right. It is fitting that there should be a Freifrau von Ostenburg, and it is not fitting that the Freiherr von Ostenburg should fling aside duty for the sake of —of one who can never be more than a friend."

He was silent, trying to read her face.

" I sometimes wonder whether you have no heart," he said at last, bitterly. " It tortures me, it intoxicates me, to see you in this house of which you should have been the mistress ; and you speak calmly of my duty towards it. What do I care for duty ? I shall never marry now—my mother knows it ! Would you have me marry one woman while I love another ? That would not seem to me very honourable ! You have bound me to silence, Madame, but you must know the truth as well as if I spoke it, and who it is that I love ! You have no heart, and so you can say these things calmly."

No heart ! When her breast was throbbing with agony—every nerve strained to the utmost : this was the hardest to bear.

" If I say them, Monsieur," she answered gently, " it is because I feel that I have been in the wrong. I offered you friendship, because your friendship was—was precious to me, forgetting that for a man and a woman friendship is not possible. You grew impatient, you chose to act upon the memory of a boy-and-girl fancy, absurd for people of our age, you said a thing that should never have been spoken, but I forgave you—weakly, it seems ! And now I know that I was in

the wrong, for you are still unreasonable, you still think of me in a way that is right neither for you nor me. And so, Monsieur, I think it will be well if you do not see me so often when we go back to Cassel—better still, if you go away for a while—best of all if you forget all this and remember your duty to your family.”

Heinz looked and listened, wondering. Was she heartless, after all—or did she mean that it was painful for her to see him? She spoke calmly, and yet he could see that her cheeks were burning, even in the pallor of the moonlight, that the hand resting on the balustrade shook. Surely, surely he had attained his dream, and she loved him, even while speaking these cruel words! He drew nearer to her and took her hand.

“Anaïs, is that true?” he cried passionately. “You want me to go away from you, never to see you again? Anaïs!”

She interrupted him with a warning gesture, as two figures appeared not far from them on the terrace.

“I wish to go back to the ballroom,” she said, and Heinz was forced to obey.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUNSET

IT was still early when Ostenburg's guests were in the saddle and on their way to partake of Herr von Pustau's hospitality. Heinz watched Madame Duclos longingly and questioningly, wondering, and yet hardly daring to guess, what she had meant by her words of last night. He was torn by doubts, cooled from the reckless mood, and yet in revolt against destiny. He could not be altogether indifferent to the appeal made to his honour by such lips as those of Anaïs, and the rights of his house warred continually with the cry of his heart. At one moment he was ready to break through every law, and bear away the woman he loved on the tide of his passion ; at the next he resolved never to see her again, to offer himself as a sacrifice to the traditions of Ostenburg. As he saw her riding before him, or playing tenderly with Pustau's little daughters, or silent with eyes full of reverie, he swayed from one mood to the other, passion insensibly prevailing as the day advanced and arming itself with the subtle argument, whether, if she indeed loved him, he had the right to hurt her, even though his own pain ought not to be considered. A stronger, simpler man would have seen the matter more clearly ; Heinz, accustomed to weigh everything from every point of view, according to each its merits, was dazzled

by the multiplicity of aspects which passed over his mind. He could not decide trenchantly which course was indubitably right, which wrong, and, while he wavered, love, incomparably the strongest force in his being, compelled him to yield to its dictates.

They reached home only just in time for dinner—comfortably tired, as Veronika declared—and afterwards, in the level glow of approaching sunset, they walked out on to the terrace and down the avenue. Clouds had gathered in the west,—great grey masses tinged with gold,—and the lighter, wind-spread mists above grew rosy from instant to instant, while the landscape sank into that mystery of twilight which not even the magic of the moon can excel. Heinz led his guests by a side-path from the avenue to the borders of the lake, whence the west was fully displayed ; they strolled onward in little groups, and Anaïs, eager to miss nothing of the gorgeous spectacle, soon outstripped the rest with Ostenburg at her side. When they reached the lake they were almost alone; by the bank lay a little boat used for rowing to the wooded islands which were dotted over it, and into this Heinz sprang, holding out his hand.

“The best view is from the water,” he said. “Come quickly, Madame, or you will miss it !”

For once off her guard, and so entranced by the glory of the heavens that she did not observe their solitude, Anaïs accepted the proffered help, and took her place in the stern. Ostenburg unmoored the boat and with swift strokes rowed out upon the dark waters. It was a fairy passage to him with that woman opposite, ethereal in her white dress, and he felt borne on some fatal tide, whither he knew not. Anaïs was leaning forward with her head turned from him, and one

slender hand trailing over the boat's edge in the ripple of the oar's strokes ; her lips were parted in delight, her bosom heaved ; she was intent on the sky, and yet it seemed to Heinz that in a moment she must turn and speak the word for which he longed. He was in no haste to call it forth—he was content to look at her and wait.

They passed between the islands and then on to a clear expanse of water which, mirror-like, reflected the sky. The trees on either side sank into a confused mass of shadow, grey-blue and pearly ; the islands swam dark in a blaze of splendour. More and more gorgeous grew the heavens ; the heavy cloud-masses were brown and crimson now, the lighter mists flakes of rosy fire upon a sky of turquoise blue, and at the horizon glowed a single line of intense orange through which the sun passed until it dipped beyond the hills and departed, leaving for a space trails of glory.

Heinz shipped his oars and paused, awed by the mystery of the hour ; why could he not stay so for ever, gazing on the beloved face lit by that glow of sunset ? She said no word, but her eyes were eloquent of wonder and delight. He would have moved to her side, taken her hand, made some mute appeal—but he dared not break the spell ; there was on him the necessity of waiting for something,—a sign,—he knew not what. Very slowly the light changed and faded, then he saw that her lips quivered and her eyes filled with tears ; at last she covered her face with her hand and gave a little sob. He started forward, caught the hand which rested on the gunwale and drew her towards him, murmuring brokenly :

“ My darling, you are unhappy ! Anaïs, speak ! ”

She raised her head and at last, far from the world as

they were and beyond its burdens, he read deep in her tear-stained eyes the secret she had held so closely. For an instant that seemed eternal they stayed thus, then she drew back terrified.

"Remember, Heinz!" she whispered. "Oh, I should not have come!"

His name from her lips thrilled him and he would not loose her hand.

"Why need we remember?" he cried.

"Because we must. Row me back now!" she besought him. "It was too beautiful — too beautiful to last. For pity's sake, Monsieur!"

Reluctantly he loosed her hand, reluctantly unshipped the oars and let them slide into the still water. As they approached the shore he looked back and saw that the clouds had burned to cinders, cold and grey. The spell of Nature was gone, but his soul was still shaken by that which he had read in Anaïs's eyes: what it might mean for the future he scarcely knew.

On the shore the rest of the party were assembled laughing and talking, and Madame Duclos was rallied on having secured the best place to view the grand performance of the heavens. She forced herself to answer in the proper spirit, and only the quick eyes of Veronika discerned in the dim light that there were tears on her friend's lashes—discerned it with a sudden awakening of that vague fear of some great trouble to come. Ostenburg's share in it the girl dared not guess.

Egon, roused next day by a brilliant dawn, was surprised to meet Heinz in the avenue as though on the return from a walk; they greeted each other briefly.

"The morning was too fine to waste," said Egon. "But you are indeed energetic. I thought myself the first down."

"I could not sleep. I never went to bed at all," explained the other in a hurried, constrained voice. "We shall have a perfect day for the drive back to Cassel!"

Egon glanced up sharply and saw something strange in the troubled looks and restless eyes of his friend.

"Come, walk down the avenue with me again," he said, taking Ostenburg's arm. "We have not had a good talk together for an age. It seemed like old times again yesterday when we rode over to my brother's."

"They were good old times," said Heinz, with a sigh. "What misery might be saved us, what perplexity, if we might be boys for ever in a womanless world!"

Egon thought of Veronika and shook his head.

"If there were no women who would there be to look up to, to soften us, to teach us? No, Heinz, they may be cruel, they may be indifferent, but they give us an ideal."

Heinz was recalled to himself.

"*Schwärmer!*" he said. "And yet you are right. May you be happier than I, old fellow! She must learn to love you."

"I spoke the other day. There is nothing but patience. I will never marry another woman."

Ostenburg broke out in railing against her who could make his friend suffer, but Egon silenced him, saying:

"For the sake of our friendship, no word against her, Heinz!"

"Forgive me. I am bitter, unstrung to-day. My God, what misery women bring us! Here am I with everything that leads to happiness, and yet—" He

broke off abruptly, tossing back his hair with a wild gesture.

Egon looked at him sharply, apprehensively; knowing that unwelcome speech is no part of friendship he had been silent, though he had guessed much for some while back, but now it seemed to him that the moment for silence was at an end.

"Listen, old fellow," he said gently. "I don't want to pry into what is your own affair, but can I help you?"

Heinz shook his head.

"No one can help me," he said. "Perhaps I'm a fool—but you see, Egon— What am I saying? You know that an irony of Fate brought her back to me when she could never be mine. I thought I had forgotten—I found I could never forget. You know the rest. I ought to have gone away then for ever."

"You came back—you left the Prussian service?"

"Because I could not keep away. I loved her—I love her!"

Like all reserved people Heinz, under great stress, had fits of expansion. He poured out the story of his love—his struggles, his perplexity—more fully than in a calmer moment he would have deemed possible. Egon listened with knit brows, hardly believing that such a confession could fall from the lips of the cold Ostenburg and rightly judging that the storm must be severe to shake such a nature. Heinz concealed nothing; moved by Anaïs's tears to the wild hope of mutual love, he was yet torn by the doubts, the warnings of duty. At one moment he breathed out ecstasies, at the next he shrank back appalled before the breaking of ties and the outraging of gratitude.

"There's only one thing for you to do," said Egon

at last, taking the ascendancy which a calm man must needs have over one distraught. "You must go away. Duclos is your friend."

"Go away! But I can't live without seeing her! Better her friendship than nothing!"

"To what good can it lead! Heinz, I can't let you throw away your life for the sake of a woman—you, the finest officer in Germany!"

"You think too well of me! Have I not joined the enemy of my country for her?"

"And that was unworthy of you! No, you must go. If you love her you wish her to be happy; your presence cannot make her so."

"But—but if she loves me!" Heinz murmured brokenly, remembering last night.

"The more reason that you should go. You do not wish to ruin her. Heinz, you must not yield to this—to this madness! It is not worthy of your name. Honour is the only rule for us all. Think of your mother, Heinz!"

Ostenburg bent his head in silence.

"I have thought of her," he said at last in a low voice. "But what is home, mother, name, weighed against Anaïs? My honour is pledged to *her*!"

"Then for her sake—for the sake of your betrothal years ago—don't make her unhappy! Even if she does not love you now, can you be silent? Could any woman keep from loving you if you spoke to her with the passion with which you have spoken to me? Heinz, be brave, for her sake!"

They had reached the end of the avenue and Ostenburg swung slowly round to face his friend. Egon had touched the nobler chord that ran through his complex nature and it was easy at all times for him to yield to

impulse either good or bad—a sign perhaps of a certain inherent weakness of character. He remembered Anaïs's utter helplessness in her flow of tears last night, her cry of despair: "For pity's sake, row me back, Monsieur!" and, with a sudden awakening of all that was chivalrous and strong in him, he threw aside all thought of self, tuned at last to heroism. He fought out the fight in silence within his heart and conquered.

"You are right, you are right!" he said presently, with the glow of victory on his face. "Her happiness should be my first thought. General Duclos is a good man; she has been happy with him. I must not stay selfishly to make her miserable. What does it matter if I suffer? You're a true friend, Egon; you have made me see clearly. I was mad before!"

He wrung the other's hand and in silence they returned to the house.

If he could have gone at once! With such a character as Ostenburg's, a resolution had best be acted upon while the glow of its conception is still in the heart. Later, regret will come and self-sacrifice will show in a greyer, harsher light, so that at last the man who was strong merely on impulse will yield again to the dictates of feeling, and forget the vow sworn in a moment of exaltation. In such a mood of exaltation Heinz was now. He watched Anaïs with the eyes of one who looks for the last time, he treasured up her least words for the bitter consolation of memory when he should be far away, his imagination was aglow with the splendid misery of giving up all that he held most dear for the happiness of the woman whom he held most dear. It was with the consciousness of a last farewell that he kissed her hand when they parted on her threshold after the long day's drive through shady woods and

roads bordered with fruit-trees. In the three days of her visit he had known the poignancy of uncertainty, pain, joy, renunciation, and into the voluntary exile which his fancy pictured he would bear, at least, the remembrance of her eyes at sunset on the lake.

CHAPTER XIX

OSTENBURG TEARS UP A LETTER

IN the fire of his resolution Heinz approached the King that night to express his desire to volunteer for service in Spain. Jerome laughed, disapproved, and finally gave a half-grudging consent, even while he bade the Freiherr reconsider his decision.

“Why this sudden wish for active service?” he asked. “Can you not wait until the troop which the Emperor commands is ready? I may go myself; my kingdom could well spare me for a month or two.”

“Sire, I grow restless in peace,” said Ostenburg. “I cannot afford to wait, lest the war should come to an end.”

“You are, I see, resolute to be killed at all costs! I cannot forbid your desire for that distinction, but at least I beg you to think the matter over. There are men I could better spare than you.”

“Your Majesty’s goodness is unparalleled,” rejoined Ostenburg as the King dismissed him.

Nevertheless he wrote next day to Murat, and laid the letter on his writing-table, ready for the post which would leave Cassel that evening. He himself had affairs to settle and would push forward to the front in a day or two. What did it matter where he fought or for whom? Away from Anaïs, separated from her for ever, he asked no more than the clash of

Ostenburg Tears up a Letter 199

arms, the desperate charge that he loved, beside the greatest cavalry leader of the day, and at last an honourable death—a speedy one if the heavens were kind.

His letter written, he went out for a wild gallop, urging his horse at full speed through wood and field, careless whither he went or whom he passed. Foam-flecked and heated, horse and rider entered Cassel to meet, in the Königsplatz, the General, spick and span, with sword and sabretache clattering as he trotted along. Seeing Heinz he drew rein and saluted gaily.

“*Eh bien, Freiherr!*” he cried; “where have you been? You have spared neither horse nor man, it seems!”

Ostenburg was forced to stop and return the other’s greeting.

“I’ve been for a long gallop to clear my brain,” he said. “The day was too fine to lose.”

“And what’s this about your volunteering for the war? It’s the gossip of the Court!”

Heinz raised his eyebrows, saying:

“Gossip might find a better subject; and yet, for once, gossip is true. Inaction is not good for a soldier, General.”

“His Majesty will never consent to spare you—besides, if you wait, there will be war not so far to seek as Spain.”

“I have hopes that His Majesty will be persuaded. I am restless, impatient—what you will; I cannot wait! But I ought not to detain you with my affairs.”

He was about to pass on, but the General prevented him, saying:

“I must hear more of this, Freiherr. Let me think! My wife and I are alone to-night. Come and dine with us, if you have no other engagement.”

Heinz drew a quick breath and let his eyes fall, toying absently with his horse's mane. After all—why not? It was for the last time, and they had met so often; besides he had no reasonable excuse for refusal. The temptation was too strong and, relying on the force of his resolve, he yielded, for the sake of looking into her face once again. He raised his head and met Duclos's honest eyes full, almost defiantly, saying:

"A thousand thanks, General! I shall be delighted. You dine at five? Then I have just time to change and be with you punctually."

He set spurs to his horse and rode back to Napoleons-höhe. The letter still lay on his writing-table and while he dressed he charged Veit not to forget it. The faithful servant knew of his master's intended departure and was resolved to accompany him, even though Heinz had given him the choice of remaining at home; he was now busy with preparations, and had a thousand things to ask the Freiherr.

While Ostenburg was buckling on his sword there came a knock at the door and Egon's voice without. Veit flew to admit him, and then discreetly retired with his master's dusty clothes on his arm. Egon was in uniform, about to mount guard.

"You are going out to dine?" he inquired. "I heard nothing of it. Where?"

"At the Duclos's. I met the General in Cassel an hour ago and he invited me."

Ostenburg's voice was studiously indifferent, but Egon saw how nervously his fingers played upon the sword-hilt.

"To the Duclos's! Heinz, are you wise?" he cried.

"It was impossible to refuse. And why should I?"

Ostenburg Tears up a Letter 201

You know that I am leaving Cassel. You can read the address of that letter."

Egon lifted it mechanically.

"To Murat! I'm glad," he said heartily.

"Then do you trust me so little as to think I cannot see her once more and be silent?"

Egon put his hand on Ostenburg's shoulder and looked into his face, saying:

"Forgive me! But I thought of yesterday morning."

"Yesterday morning I was mad. To-day I am as calm and reasonable as you could wish. I promise you that there shall be not a word or a sign—besides Duclos will be there, a sufficient reminder!"

"And when do you go?"

"Home to-morrow, and then to Paris. I hear that my intention has become public property. Duclos knew of it."

"Gossip flies everywhere," Egon said, frowning. He could not tell Heinz the wild speculations that were afloat regarding the cause of his departure. Scandal had coupled his name with that of Madame Duclos for some time past, and Pustau could not be deaf to it.

"I'll walk down with you," said Ostenburg, seeing that Egon was about to go. When they parted in the courtyard Pustau went to his duty with a sigh; he wished that Heinz had not chanced to meet the General that day, even while such an occurrence might perhaps give the lie to scandal.

Only Duclos was in the drawing-room when Ostenburg was announced, but a moment or two later Anaïs entered, and came forward to greet her guest. She wore a dress of some soft silken stuff which fluttered as

she moved, and against the gleaming whiteness of her neck nestled a few pale roses, fastened by a diamond clasp ; Heinz, as he ceremoniously bent to touch her fingers with his lips, thought he had never seen her so lovely.

" Was it not fortunate that I happened to meet Ostenburg ? " said the General, leaning back in his chair. " He had been for a wild ride of I don't know how many miles ! "

" I am very glad to see Monsieur von Ostenburg, " rejoined Anaïs simply, as she sat down in the chair Heinz had drawn forward for her.

" You are still of the same mind about leaving us, Freiherr ? " continued Duclos.

" I am quite decided, and I shall tell the King so to-night. I think—I believe, Madame will approve me, " he added boldly. " A soldier should not spend his time in pleasure. "

" I quite agree with you, " replied Anaïs gravely. " It is a pity that the Freiherr von Ostenburg should waste his powers here in Cassel when there is a man's work to be done in Spain. "

Her words cut him, though he had asked for them, but she had need to be cruel to keep firm. Puzzled as well as relieved by his demeanour since that instant's communion on the lake, she had rightly read his determination to leave Cassel as the chivalrous desire to disturb her peace no more, and even while her heart ached at the agony of losing him she was glad, knowing that she could play the part of indifference no longer. For Heinz the position had grown intolerable, and when Anaïs laid her fingers on his arm to be led in to dinner, the light touch burned him like fire. Egon was right,—he had better not have come.

"If you waited, Freiherr, you might have war nearer home!" said the General as they sat down to table. "I wager that 1809 will not pass without some disturbance from Austria."

"With the Emperor one cannot count on peace from one month to another! But what is there to hinder my winning some share of glory in the Spanish War before I march with His Majesty against Vienna?"

"And you are now with us, with the Emperor, heart and soul?" asked Anaïs. Politics were a safe subject and she was steeled to his going.

"Heart and soul, Madame," echoed he, with a deeper meaning in the words than he would have calmly chosen, or she have wished to understand. Then more lightly: "Germany is a dead letter; Prussia a nullity. Who could choose to serve under Friedrich Wilhelm when he might have Napoleon for a master? Personal genius is the only thing worth taking into consideration. Stein and his disciples are madmen—admirable if you will, but none the less mad for that!"

"If more of your countrymen thought as you do, France might feel a greater security," said Duclos approvingly. "And that is the reason why the King will not so easily spare you. Such an example as yours has great weight. There is discontent in Westphalia as elsewhere; Stein is working secretly."

"Whatever Stein may do, and I trust he has little power for mischief, I cannot think that my presence would affect the situation."

"You are too modest! I shall hope, nevertheless, that His Majesty will persuade you to remain. Tell me now, Freiherr: what was it that induced you to rally?"

Heinz paused and looked at Madame Duclos. For

a moment that queer, reasonable spirit which underlay his impulsiveness told him that the Stein at whom he sneered was a more loyal gentleman than he himself, and that patriotism was, after all, a better motive than love of a woman who was another man's wife. But what a woman ! his heart retorted, as she turned her soft eyes upon him and touched the tendrils of her hair with nervous, delicate fingers.

"A multitude of things swayed me," he said at last. "A wish for the good of my country, admiration of the Emperor, disgust at Prussia's ineptitude——"

Anaïs knew that he spoke but half the truth ; she had guessed his reason long ago, and perhaps the knowledge that in influencing him she served the Emperor had quieted her conscience. The General was, however, open and unsuspecting.

"All reasons are good which lead to so wise a decision," he said heartily. "Will you try this Burgundy ? I can answer for it !"

The conversation drifted to other topics. Duclos was in the best humour possible, and he related his favourite anecdotes with infinite relish ; his wit had the racy flavour of Provence and, though neither of his listeners was in the mood to enjoy it, it served to keep a semblance of merriment afloat. Anaïs was brilliant as usual—too brilliant, perhaps, in her effort to be at ease and unconcerned. She let no topic arise between herself and Heinz—and how many there were !—in which the General could not take part, or if such an one was mentioned she turned to her husband, explaining the matter with delicate tact.

"You liked that too, Jean," she said, when Heinz spoke of some poem which they had both admired, reading it together.

" But I don't remember, *mon amie* ! "

" What gallantry ! I read it aloud, and you protested that it was delightful. A Frenchman should know how to make pretty speeches, even to his wife ! "

" Ah, *mon amie*, I liked your voice," laughed Duclos. " I listened to that rather than to the poem. I am a mere rough soldier, Freiherr—neither a poet nor an appreciator of poetry. Such things always seemed to me incompatible with true valour—until I met you, Ostenburg. I knew you long ago by repute as a brave officer ; I found that you understood poetry as well as the longest-haired sentimentalist of them all. I acknowledge my error ! "

He bowed gaily to Heinz over his wine.

" The General has vindicated his power of making pretty speeches," said the Freiherr, biting his lip. " It only remains for me to say that he has the valour which inspires poetry. "

Anaïs was relieved when she could rise and leave the gentlemen to their cigars. Yes ; she was glad that he was going, she told herself, as she flung open the drawing-room window and saw the long evening shadows across the grass. But it was hard to lose him—to think of him facing danger, death perhaps, without the full knowledge that the heart of the woman he loved was his to all eternity—hard not to say the word which had almost escaped her lips that night in the boat, and which now she could not forbear to hope that he had guessed. She sat down before the piano and began to play, almost unconsciously pouring out her heart in music and gaining consolation from the expression of that which she might not utter in speech.

When the two men rejoined her she paused, but Heinz besought her to continue, and she acquiesced,

finding music easier than conversation. The Freiherr turned his chair so that he might watch the outline of her slender throat, the movements of her white fingers which seemed in some way blent with the sweetness and power of the melody and inextricable from it. Anaïs had done better not to have played to him to-night, for the music which he drank in with eye and ear thrilled him to the soul and melted him to a mood of reckless passion, the stronger because he felt it was the last time that he should thus listen.

Presently the door opened and a servant approached Duclos, speaking some words to him in a low voice. He rose, whispered an apology to Heinz and softly left the room; the servant shut the door with a little click, and Ostenburg was alone with Anaïs. She played on, unconscious of the interruption, for the door was behind her and she was absorbed in her music. Ostenburg leaned forward with glowing eyes, forgetful of everything but her. The chords were soft and slow now—it seemed as if the sound of weeping were in their voice—and then suddenly there floated out above them a dance, a delicate, courtly dance of the *ancien régime*, sad for all the swing of its measure. The listener's heart stood still, and the past rose up before him in overwhelming reality—the beginning of the idyll which was now become a tragedy. Anaïs played on, rapt by the spell which the music wove for her also; it seemed that there was nothing real in all the world save they two, and old, quaint melody. Heinz could endure in silence no longer; he rose, went towards her, bent over her.

“Anaïs! Anaïs!” he pleaded. “Do you not know that you are playing on a man's heart-strings? You are very cruel—unless——”

Ostenburg Tears up a Letter 207

She looked up and met his eyes ; the notes quavered, her hands fell from the keyboard. The music had broken down his resolve ; overmastered by the love held so long in check, he kneeled beside her and caught her in his arms. She started back in horror.

"Heinz ! Heinz ! what are you doing ?" she whispered.

He would not release her hands ; this time she must listen.

"What am I doing ?" he said low and earnestly. "I am telling you that I love you with all my soul, that I have loved you for eighteen years, and never anyone but you ! Why should we be kept apart ? You belong to me—to me only, Anaïs, for I know that you love me, and you do not love him ! I read it in your eyes that night on the lake."

"I must not listen," she murmured. "Heinz, let me go ! You make me afraid."

"Not until you say that you love me still ! If you do not love me why did you let me kiss you just now ? Why did you not call Duclos, when your guest forgot that he was your guest and only remembered that he loved you ? You have tried to hide it, Anaïs, but at last I saw ! You keep the ring that I gave you ! Yes, I knew that at Ostenburg ! Your faint at my home, your tears that night on the lake—dearest, beloved, you cannot deny it ! Why should you ? We have been parted long enough. The law which separates us is cruel, unreasonable !"

She had listened with tear-bright eyes, for she was too weak to combat further. In the long strife between love and duty Ostenburg had slowly won ground, and now, as he kneeled before her with his glowing, imperious words, she knew that he had conquered.

"Heinz, don't you understand?" she whispered with white lips. "Even if I love you there is a river as deep as death between us! For you I am dead, just as if I had gone with my mother to the guillotine. Fate has been very cruel to us, but we must be loyal: you to your friend, I to my husband. The river can never be bridged over."

"Love can bridge it over! We cannot be bound by common rules. Anaïs, say that you love me!"

The eyes that had lost all indolence in fire forced her answer.

"Alas! I do," she sighed.

He pressed her hands fervently to his lips, crying:

"How long you deceived me! I thought you were heartless, forgetful! I never dreamed this!"

"Hush!" she murmured. "Heinz, we must be brave all the more now. You are going away to-morrow."

He had forgotten it, and, as he read the confession of love in her dark eyes, he cursed the impulse which had brought him to such a resolve. It was impossible to leave her.

"You wish me to go, dearest?" he asked, smiling at her.

"If I wish it!" she cried, then drew her hands away and moved from the piano. "It is best so," she whispered, so low that he could hardly hear.

He followed her, with persuasions crowding to his lips, and would have caught at her hand again, but the sound of an opening door made them start asunder, the dream-world shattered.

The General entered with a preoccupied air, holding an open letter in his hand. He did not observe his wife's pale looks, nor the change on Ostenburg's face.

Ostenburg Tears up a Letter 209

"I am commanded to travel without delay to Paris," he said abruptly. "The Emperor desires certain communications concerning the Westphalian army and the troop for Spain; the King has chosen me as his envoy."

"This is surely unexpected, General," said Heinz with a sudden throb of the heart.

Anaïs had turned round, and was listening, startled.

"I must leave you behind, *mon amie*," continued Duclos, crossing to her. "I shall have to travel post-haste. But you have many friends here now. I am sure Ostenburg, while he remains in Cassel, would be at your service in any emergency. Would you not, Freiherr?"

"I am at Madame's service now or at any time," answered Heinz gravely.

Anaïs gave a nervous laugh, saying:

"Monsieur is very good."

The General was perusing his letter again.

"Excuse me for a moment, Ostenburg," he said, looking up. "I forgot to give an important message."

Again they were alone; Heinz moved to Anaïs's side.

"It lies in your hands," he said softly. "Shall I go, or shall I stay?"

She waited for what seemed to him an eternity, looking out at the twilight in the garden and the lights of the village beyond. A round of laughter rang out in the distance, mingling with merry voices. They seemed the more solitary for that far-off life. His hand sought the one that hung at her side, his breath stirred her hair. At last she yielded.

"Don't go, Heinz," she murmured.

When Ostenburg returned to the Palace a little

while later, he went to his room and slowly tore the letter on his table before going to the King.

"Well, Freiherr, have you reconsidered the matter of which you spoke last night?" was Jerome's greeting.

Ostenburg bowed and replied with perfect self-possession :

"Sire, I have seen the wisdom of your representations and shall be happy to stay with your Majesty."

Two equerries in the corner of the room whispered with a laugh one to the other :

"He comes from the Duclos's. What about the representations of Madame Anaïs?"

CHAPTER XX

FRITZ BEGS A FAVOUR OF MADAME DUCLOS

GENERAL DUCLOS'S absence was prolonged beyond the period he had expected, but it was observed that Anaïs did not relax the gaiety of her house after his departure. She gave the same brilliant dinners, was as frequently at Court, and rode out every day with a merry party of her friends. Scandal-mongers remarked that Heinz von Ostenburg was a very frequent visitor—indeed, his admiration for the beautiful Frenchwoman had long been common talk, for there were women whom envy spurred to say bitter things of Madame Duclos, men whose jealousy of the Freiherr rejoiced to find a vulnerable spot in him—nevertheless, while some of the more severe German families, such as the Wischenheims, were cold to Anaïs, the less scrupulous courtiers saw no reason why they should not accept her hospitality.

In the first intoxication of their newly declared love Heinz and Anaïs cared little for what the world might say. Heinz was superbly indifferent to the comments, the wonder his suddenly extinguished ardour for war provoked, and Anaïs of course heard nothing of the gossip concerning herself—nor, owing to their friendship, did Veronika, who, indeed, had she heard it, would have indignantly refuted such a charge against her friend. Egon heard, knew, and guessed more.

He was deeply grieved. The sudden change of plan was to him even more significant than to others, yet he dared not speak of it to Heinz, for there had come between them, not exactly a coldness, but an estrangement. Heinz, knowing himself in the wrong, avoided Pustau, or set up that barrier of reserve which no one could penetrate ; at times, too, he was irritable, quick to fire at some chance word, then, half-ashamed at his petulance, at others almost boyishly merry. Egon noted all the changes, and put his own interpretation upon them, very sad that so fine a man should yield to a passion which could, in the end, only bring misery to himself and to the woman he loved. Egon had tried his best to avert the calamity ; he could now do no more than stand aside and watch the issue.

Besides this, his thoughts were occupied in another direction. Frau von Barby had been ill since the visit to Ostenburg, and Veronika had appeared less constantly in society. Pustau, however, was a frequent visitor, and the girl began to lean on him in matters of business, to take his advice when her own judgment was at fault, her brother being so young. She was touched, too, by his loyalty to the promise he had made, and strove to show her appreciation of it by greater friendliness, sure as she was that no other feeling could be accorded him. Of this Egon was not so certain, and he could not repress a hope that she was yielding, though he was too wise to show it before the right time.

This illness of her mother's had prevented Veronika from being with Madame Duclos as often as before, and when, on an October evening, she arrived in the Königstrasse to assist Anaïs in an entertainment which they had long planned, the friends had not met for

nearly a fortnight. With this entertainment the most rigid propriety of Cassel could have found no fault ; Anaïs had invited all the children of her acquaintance to a dance—a real ball, as she told her devoted admirer, Hans von Wischenheim, to whose suggestion, indeed, the scheme was due. He had complained one day that the grown-up people had all the sport, and Anaïs, so happy that she would fain have made the whole world so, promised him that he should have no need for envy.

Now she moved among her young guests with a smiling grace that won their hearts. Egon and Veronika were her most active helpers, both indefatigable in creating spirit and merriment, and a few other of her more intimate friends had come to join in the sport ; in this way it was not remarkable that Heinz von Ostenburg was among the number, though a very curious eye might have detected the colour which stained Madame Duclos's cheek as the Freiherr kissed her hand, and his rare, brilliant smile.

“ How all the world adores you ! ” he said.

She glanced up quickly, saying :

“ You must not talk like that ! ”

“ Ah, but no one hears ! The mothers are absorbed in watching the antics of their offspring.”

“ You must not be satirical ! — There is no prettier sight than happy children. Look at the sweet little pair over there trying to waltz ! And the dear child whom Herr von Pustau apparently is teaching to flirt.”

“ Less harm than if she were ten years older ! ”

“ Then he would not look at her. He has eyes for no one but Veronika ! I don't know what I should do without them both to-night. Well, Hans, what do you want ? ”

"I want you to dance with me," said the little lad, making his best bow.

She bent down to him, dazzlingly gracious.

"Am I not too old to be your partner?" she asked.

He held out his hand.

"But you are prettier than anyone else. Come, Madame!"

"'Out of the mouths of babes!'" quoted Heinz, irreverently. "What shall I do?"

"Find a partner!" laughed Anaïs over her shoulder as little Hans led her away.

Ostenburg turned to obey, and sought out a little girl whose shyness had left her partnerless. When he chose to exert himself he could be as charming to children as to their elders, and they seemed to draw out the tenderer, gentler side of his nature. Veronika watched him with approval, and thought within herself how unjust were those who called him cold and cynical. But she was puzzled, too, by him, and since the stay at Ostenburg had felt vaguely uneasy when she saw him with Anaïs, for she could not be altogether blind to his adoration of her friend. Egon's voice broke in upon her thoughts:

"Is your brother not coming to-night?" he asked.

"I expected to see him."

"He ought to be here by now," she answered, glancing at the clock. "But he had some engagement and said he would be late."

Madame Duclos overheard.

"We can't do without Fritz," she said. "Have I promised you this dance, Monsieur von Ostenburg? Since you say so, I suppose I must believe it!"

"Was I likely to forget, Anaïs?" he whispered as they moved away.

But Veronika caught the name, almost doubting her own ears, and quivered with a sudden pain at her heart. Surely she had not heard aright! Surely Anaïs was true!

The younger children had already been torn away from their pleasures when Fritz appeared. He was a little pale and Madame Duclos, seeing the glow of his grey eyes, the something new in his pose and expression, asked him if anything had happened. He assured her, rather hastily, that there was nothing out of the common, and implored her for a dance. She gave him the waltz that was just beginning, and told him with a smile that his dancing had improved.

"Soon you will waltz as well as Monsieur von Ostenburg," she said.

"You have taught me," he replied. "And if—" He broke off abruptly.

"What's wrong, Fritz? You are not yourself to-night. Have you been playing high?"

"On my honour, no! I promised you, Madame!" he flashed out indignantly.

"Forgive me. What is it then? What made you late? You've met some charming girl!"

"A girl!" the lad cried scornfully. "As if I cared for girls—as if I would be led away by a mere pretty face!"

She smiled at him indulgently, saying:

"And you are just nineteen! Fritz, Fritz, you'll sing another tune one of these days!"

"Not I!" he maintained. Then suddenly, abruptly, under cover of a louder burst of music: "Have you never read in the old legends how a knight would vow himself to the service of a lady, one whom he might perhaps never marry, but whom he would serve truly

all his life long? That's what I've done, Madame! You know I am vowed to your service."

"My dear boy, old romances have turned your brain, as they did that of Don Quixote, and you are talking nonsense!" said Anaïs reprovingly and yet kindly, for she liked the warm-hearted lad.

"But I am serious, Madame! Won't you believe me? And—and—"—his cheeks were crimson now—"sometimes the lady gave her knight a glove or a flower to tie on his helmet when he went to war. You are wearing flowers now. Won't you—won't you give me one?"

"Foolish child! Come, we will dance again, if you insist on talking nonsense."

Suddenly, quite unaccountably, his grey eyes filled with tears.

"I wonder if you would care if I died, Madame!" he said.

"Of course, Fritz. I should be very sorry. But who talks of dying? You are young and strong!"

"But sometimes—one thinks of it, Madame! You would be sorry, really sorry?"

"Of course! But why do you persist? You are in no danger?" she asked with sudden apprehension.

He caught his breath and gave a nervous laugh.

"Danger! Why, no. But the peace can't last long, Madame; and in war—a soldier can't count on his life!"

Anaïs sighed.

"We dare not think of that, we women who are left behind! But come, this is n't the right talk for a ballroom!"

At the end of the dance he glanced at his watch and, to Anaïs's surprise, prepared to take leave of her. She

begged him to stay, but he would not be persuaded, pleading an important engagement. At the moment some other guest claimed her attention ; she barely heeded Fritz's lingering touch upon her hand as he bent to kiss it, or observed that he caught up a rose which had fallen from her dress and hid it in his coat.

Ostenburg was in no mood for sleep and long after he had returned to the Palace he sat by the window in a lover's reverie, while the moonlight paled and the grey dawn broke above the hills. He was aroused by a knock at the door. Pustau stood there, white and dishevelled, with a young subaltern of the Guards by his side. Ostenburg's lips had no time to frame a question before he was bidden to follow. Egon explained as he went : there had been a duel between Fritz von Barby and Dalz, the finest swordsman in Cassel; the lad lay wounded, it was feared mortally, and had sent for Egon and Heinz. Ostenburg, inexpressibly grieved, questioned the subaltern, one of Fritz's closest friends, who, stunned and horrified, could tell him little. It had been a quarrel over cards, he said ; Barby could not refuse the duel, had, indeed, provoked it by a deliberate insult.

" A piece of boyish bravado with a tragic end," murmured Heinz sadly. " Ought not his sister to be fetched, Egon ? "

" It is surely too painful for her ! "

" Worse when she knows—and feels that she was not there. Fräulein Veronika would not shrink from pain. Bring her, Egon ; I will go to Fritz."

Pustau silently assented ; he suffered both for himself and for Veronika. Ostenburg pursued his way with the subaltern to the little hut outside the town where Fritz lay. The doctor made him a sign that

there was no hope, and indeed the lad's face alone would have told him so. He was conscious, however, and smiled when Heinz knelt beside the rough couch that had been prepared for him.

"It's all over," he gasped. "Anyhow, I die like a gentleman. Is Egon coming?"

"He has gone to fetch your sister."

"Poor Veronika! I did n't want her to see all this. But perhaps it's best, and I shall be glad to have her near."

"Fritz, Fritz! why did you do it?" cried Ostenburg.

The boy's eyes glowed with a sort of exultation.

"If I tell you, you will promise to say no word of it to anyone?" he murmured.

Heinz assented.

"They must think it was just a quarrel at cards; but—but you must know! And perhaps some day *she* might. That fellow insulted *her*, spoke lightly of *her*—of her and you. The villain! Don't you understand?"

Ostenburg's hand tightened on the cloak which had been thrown over Fritz. A nameless fear clutched at his heart.

"Of whom?" he whispered, with quick-drawn breath.

"Of—of Madame Duclos, Ostenburg! Could I bear it? Could a gentleman hear such insults against the purest woman in all—Raise me please. Her name must not be mentioned, but I insulted him at cards,—we were playing in the guardroom,—and then it was easy, You must know, because you love her, too. I --I guessed that, but I knew that what he said was false."

Heinz bowed his head. It flashed upon him with a sudden, agonising light, that this lad, fighting blindly to defend a woman's honour, loved her more nobly than he had done. And the pity of it all—the young life given for a lost cause—stung him more bitterly than a spoken reproach. He bent over the boy with a sort of reverence, saying slowly :

“ You acted as a brave and loyal gentleman, Fritz ! ”

Perhaps the lad's perceptions were quickened by approaching death, perhaps something strange in Ostenburg's tone struck upon his ear. He rose on his elbow with a sudden apprehension and caught at the elder man's hand, looking searchingly into his eyes.

“ It was false, was n't it ? ” he asked. “ I don't doubt her, but tell me with your own lips ! Oh, say it was false, for pity's sake ! ”

It seemed to Heinz hours that those candid eyes held his with that awful question. The scene etched itself on his brain—the low hut, the glare of a lantern struggling with the grey dawn, the doctor seated by the window, out of earshot of the little tragedy, even the pattern of the cloak thrown over the dying boy. Such moments have no time, and the soul lives in them an eternity of conflict that no joy or pain to come will ever erase. Yet only a second had passed before Ostenburg spoke firmly and clearly :

“ Of course it was false, Fritz ! ”

It was surely right that the lad should die happy ! With a glad smile he fell back just as two figures darkened the doorway and Ostenburg, with a kind of relief, yielded his place to Veronika. Her pale, set face, the agony of tenderness with which she knelt by the couch, her quick-drawn breath—all this struck at his heart in the instant before he stood aside with

Egon, so that the brother and sister might be alone. For what seemed a long while there was silence, and, looking out with unseeing eyes to the daylight which sprang over the hills, Ostenburg faced the agony of his remorse, a remorse the more poignant that for Anaïs's sake he could not express it. The noble lad there was dying as much by his hand as if he had held the blade that pierced him ! He was responsible for Veronika's pain ! But one thing was certain in the chaos of his mind : Anaïs must never know, must never endure the horror he suffered, never realise the pity of the boy's sacrifice.

At last Veronika called softly to Egon and he flew to the couch. Fritz had something to say.

" You 'll take care of her, Pustau," he whispered faintly. " I trust you ! "

It was the last word he spoke, for just as the sun leaped above the horizon his lips were sealed by death. Egon took Veronika's hand and led her away.

CHAPTER XXI

CONTAINS EXTRACTS FROM CERTAIN LETTERS WRITTEN IN THE YEAR 1809

THE winter passed with rumours of war and preparations for the coming campaign — with more secret preparations, too, in Westphalia, for something by which the widespread hatred of French rule should at last be expressed, and bloodily, though Cassel and the Court, gay as ever, dreamed not of this. The death of Fritz von Barby had been forgotten after the first outburst of pity for his mother and sister—forgotten by all but Heinz, to whom their grief was an eternal reproach. Newer scandals and the prospect of war had silenced the tongues which had wagged concerning Madame Duclos and the Freiherr von Ostenburg, for the General had returned and Heinz was often away. When he met Anaïs it was in public, or if alone, with the greatest regard for caution and at rare intervals; the one privilege they indulged — an almost daily exchange of letters expressing all that it was impossible to say when they were together—was not to be suspected.

In the early spring war was declared, and, as it seemed that Westphalia was to take no part in the campaign, Heinz with many other ambitious officers—the General among them—gave up his appointment and volunteered for active service. On the evening before

his departure Anaïs contrived to meet him in the Augarten, and, pacing a secluded alley, with clasped hands and lingering footsteps, they bade each other farewell.

"Oh, Heinz, Heinz, supposing we should never meet again!" whispered Anaïs.

"Why should I go?" he cried. "Do not let us part at all! Come away with me—what do I care for the rest? Why should I go?"

"Because you have fame to win, because you are a soldier! I was weak for a moment, but I would not hold you back. I will not ruin your career!"

"My career! What is that compared to you? Can it be even weighed in the balance with your love? What do I care for fame!"

"You don't know what you say," she whispered. "A woman's love can never fill a man's life, can never take the place of his career, his ambition. No, dearest, don't protest. I like to hear you say that it can, but I know better. You are an ambitious man—don't I know you well enough to be sure of that? You would grow weary, you would cease to care for me, and I, giving up all for you, should die of misery. I could not endure your indifference."

He caught at her hand and vowed passionately that he would love her till death.

"Even then," she said, "even then! I love you the better for your ambition and I want you to be a great man, great as you ought to be! Loving you as I do, I could not bear that people should say: 'The Freiherr von Ostenburg has flung his career to the winds for the sake of a selfish woman.' No, Heinz, I will not hold you back; only let me have the woman's privilege, and weep to see you go!"

Thus she fired him with brave words, roused him to

the ambition he was ready to fling away for her sake, and at last he pressed her hands to his lips, vowing to be worthy of her love and of his name. Still they lingered, as one lingers always in going from dear friends, though after all there is so little to be said, and the final moment must come at last.

"You 'll write very often!" he besought her.

"I promise. And you?"

"Every day, if I can!"

So, with a long embrace, they parted—he torn between love and ambition, she fearful at once for his honour and his safety.

For the next few months, lucky in the excuse of her husband's absence, Anaïs hung on the posts with a kind of fever. There was the ostensible object of her anxiety cursorily glanced at, the secret pages pored over with such tenderness. Heinz wrote fully, unrestrainedly, telling her all that he did day by day, and sure of the comprehension of perfect sympathy. His letters were not only those of a man confident that their length or minuteness could never tire the woman who loved him, but those of a friend to a friend whose mind would appreciate technical details, and follow the entanglements of battles and negotiations with the deepest interest. He wrote well, and whether he sent a few broken phrases scribbled in haste from a battlefield, or closely filled sheets written at greater leisure, Anaïs could expose his epistles to the sharpest scrutiny of her judgment without fear of disappointment, and without setting the softening veil of emotion between it and them. The pithy sentences, replete with wit, wisdom, and tenderness, the brilliant accounts of men and affairs, the vivid descriptions of battles, the poet's appreciation of fine scenery and natural beauty, of brave or

generous acts such as war alone can bring forth to weigh in the balance against its cruelty and horror — these would have delighted even a less partial critic. Surely such perfect love-letters had never been penned ! she thought ; some day he should write his memoirs !

She replied in the same way, trying to overcome the fears which she knew would distress him, and letting him see how she entered into the spirit of all that he told her. She had the repute of being a good letter-writer, even in those days when correspondence was considered a fine art, and certainly she would not fail to display all her skill in writing to Heinz. Her first letters, telling of the outbreak of Dörnberg's rebellion, were indeed hardly less exciting than his own news from the seat of war.

“ The King has acted with great tact,” she wrote, after describing the events of April 22d. “ On Sunday he was at High Mass and, though his paleness was remarked, he seemed composed and courageous. At the reception held afterwards he specially addressed the officers both of the Guards and of the Line who had attended in great numbers, and chivalrously set free from their oaths all those who desired such liberty, saying that he would rather face open enemies than unfaithful friends. The result was what you may imagine. ‘ *Vive le roi !* ’ rang through the hall in an outburst of loyalty, and, at the end of the two hours which he had given them for consideration, the officers without one exception took a fresh oath of fidelity. Such a revolt has the advantage of showing who are true friends, and of strengthening the lukewarm by an enthusiasm which the reaction naturally brings about. How many of our friends, though, are among the rebels ! Dörnberg himself, Bothmer, Von der Groeben,

Gayl — more than I can enumerate, and last, not least — do you suspect whom I mean? — Egon von Pustau ! He is, it seems, most deeply implicated, and when, on the evening of the 21st, the plot was betrayed to the King by Gayl, he fled with Dörnberg to Homburg, where the peasants were already under arms. I think if the conspiracy had had time to mature the Westphalian kingdom would have been utterly overthrown. Let us be thankful that it was discovered in time, though Frenchwoman that I am, I have a certain sympathy with the rebels, who are, after all, fighting for a cause which is sacred to them, even if they cannot deny that they are breaking their oath to the King. And yet I'm sorry for Egon's desertion ! I believe you will in a way envy him, for have you not often said that you would forfeit your talents for some of his single-minded devotion ? I pray you not to do so, for if you were he you would be my enemy, or else I should have to become the enemy of France. I think the later alternative would be preferable. It is the worse for him that his cause is hopeless and, with nothing in return, he will have flung up favour and the likelihood of promotion just at a moment when he wants them most, for, do you know, in the midst of all this turmoil, Veronika came to me to announce their betrothal — the thing which you and I have so ardently desired. You can picture her anxiety, yet she is calm under it and is very proud of him, for it seems, as I sometimes suspected, that His Majesty of Westphalia has no less loyal subject than Fräulein von Barby. The betrothal is, of course, not public property, but her friendship could not withhold it from me, and so you see me in a most complicated position, — as a Frenchwoman desiring the suppression of the revolt, and yet rejoicing at the escape

of one of the most flagrant rebels ! I am, indeed, torn two ways.

“ But the manner of this stormy betrothal you must hear. I do not think that I betray confidence in telling you—indeed, how can there be a betrayal of confidence between two people whose hearts are one ? Who but Veronika would have done it so ? Who indeed ! She is a superb creature, Heinz, too impulsive, too untamed, as yet, but already, I think, matured by grief for the loss of Fritz and by love for Egon who has all her heart. What a woman she will be in a few years, with her generous nature, her patience towards the weak, her wide tolerance ! I can pay her no greater compliment than to say that she would have been worthy of you, Heinz. But I digress, as they say my sex often does. To the point then, and the beginning of my tale ! You remember when Veronika and Frau von Barby were with your mother this winter, after that poor boy’s death, how willing Egon was to visit his brother, and how frequently we heard of his riding over to Ostenburg ? Veronika’s letters of that time told me more than she knew : I saw how she leaned on him, valued his assistance in their trouble,—saw, in short, that our proud Fräulein von Barby was yielding her heart and her independence to a man who, if not brilliant, was reliable, sympathetic, and strong with a strength to which her woman’s intellect had to bow.

They had, too, a theme of common interest in political aspects and hatred of French rule, though it seems that Egon, careful for her safety, told her no word of the conspiracy which was hatching. She might guess something, however, and when he came to visit them on the evening of the 21st, she knew it was to say good-bye. He confirmed her belief when Frau von

Barby left them alone for a moment, by breaking a promise which she had imposed upon him,—a promise never to speak to her of love,—and asking whether she had not changed her mind. She was surprised, for, with a self-deception you will hardly credit, she had believed that he now regarded her entirely as a friend, and, in her surprise,—still unaware, of course, that her heart had changed,—she kept by her old decision, stabbing him to the soul. He went soon after, and as she heard the front door clang behind him, she suddenly understood the blank that his going left, thought perhaps that the door might never open to his knock again ; and she had let him go so coldly,—he who loved her without reward but with unchanging faithfulness,—he who had stood by them through all the months of grief and desolation ! What follows is that dear, reckless Veronika all through. To-morrow might be too late ; though the clock had struck ten, she flung on her cloak, and fled through the streets to his rooms, too full of her errand to care what people might think or say. Fortunately no harm happened to her, and she reached her destination in safety ; when she saw Egon her courage failed and the thing which had seemed so easy was impossible to speak—she was afraid of him for the first time ! At this point her narrative became somewhat vague, but you will imagine that it was not very long before Egon guessed her errand, and the true heart had its reward at last. Heinz, there is something very beautiful in the love of these two ! They will be happy, I trust that, and yet I am afraid for him, fighting in that hopeless cause ! I think she loves him all the better for her long delay, and her hesitations ; her love is a plant that has grown slowly but very strongly, like one of your oak trees. Ours was a tropic flower

that sprang to life in an instant—do you remember?—at the first meeting of our eyes; I must break my simile, though, for it is as strong as the oak and as immortal as our souls. I hear her step; she wants a confidant, someone to whom she can speak of her Egon with the surety of comprehension. Dear child! Ah, my beloved, what if she knew to whom I was writing? Would she shrink from me? Heinz, if you knew how I tremble for you,—and the worst is that I must hide my pain even from my dearest friend!”

Heinz reached Abensberg on the day before the Emperor's arrival, and took part in the battle of Eggmühl as aide-de-camp to Davout. He again distinguished himself by personal courage, and was the first to enter Ratisbon; in the evening Napoleon sent for him.

“We were sitting round our bivouac fire,” he wrote; “I writing to you, two or three of us cooking the supper to the strains of ‘*Vous me quittez pour aller à la gloire*,’ the rest discussing the events of the day, when a young officer hastened up, and saluting, inquired if the Freiherr von Ostenburg was there. I asked his business. ‘The Emperor desires to see you, Monsieur,’ said he. Battle-stained though I was, I hurried off—my curiosity, as you will imagine, excited by the message, for my guide could tell me no particulars. I found His Majesty with Lannes and Davout, poring over a map. He greeted me very graciously and spoke of my former deeds with greater approbation than they deserve, expressing his pleasure that I had entered the service of France. What a genius he is, Anaïs! ‘A Corsican peasant,’ my mother calls him, and I do not doubt that your ancestors and mine were commanding armies while his were tilling the ground; but still, so

transcendent is the aristocracy of genius that I feel it no degradation for an Ostenburg and Graumoden to serve a Bonaparte. He was pleased to remark my having led the —th into Ratisbon—I forgot to tell you of that, it was a moment worth living—and offered me an appointment on his own staff, with the rank of Colonel in the French army. I accepted, believing that you would wish me to do so, and wishing it myself. It is a piece of good fortune which I suspect is due to your influence on my fate. Let me keep such a superstition, dearest ! You are ever in my thoughts, in camp, on the battlefield,—be sure of that ! May I hope that I am sometimes in yours ? Sometimes ? Shall I be presumptuous if I say—always ? Do not fear for me, beloved. I shall come back to you—I know it, I feel it ? We have suffered so much that Fate will surely not tear us apart again. Good-night, my Anaïs. To-morrow we march towards Vienna.”

Anaïs was very proud of him as she read. She had known that he must rise, that he must receive the notice of Napoleon—it could not be otherwise. And yet, how she trembled for him ! Fighting daily perhaps, one battle following another—how could she bear to think of it ! What if he should fall ? She answered by a letter in which pride and fear were strangely mingled, telling him how the official news of Eggmühl and Ratisbon, which set Cassel rejoicing, had only made her tremble until she heard from him.

“What is the fate of the Empire compared to your fate ?” she wrote. “I could hardly listen to the great *Te Deum* in the *Hof-Kirche* without breaking into tears. Then your packet came, and I almost fainted for joy. A victory is a victory indeed when you are safe. Reinhard is triumphant ; he believes that the news will do

wonders in quelling the revolt and firing lukewarm loyalty."

His next letter was in answer to her account of the insurrection and the betrothal of Egon and Veronika.

"I am anxious, I confess, but I trust you are in no danger. Still, be careful, I beseech you, for if the peasants should march against Cassel, it might be that they would break bounds and at least pillage the houses of the French. If only I were at hand to protect you! Westphalian affairs seem to me in a most critical state. I know how widespread is the disaffection, and of course the secession of even a part of the army makes such a revolt a thousandfold more serious. As a German I cannot be altogether without sympathy for the rebels—at least I understand their point of view, different though it may be from mine—and you know, dearest, that political considerations alone have not made me serve King Jerome, though, having sworn fidelity to him, I trust that nothing would tempt me to break my oath—but that is a matter for each man's own conscience. You speak rightly of Veronika von Barby, and I am glad for her and glad for Egon that they have found each other's hearts at last. How could you guess my mind so truly? Yes, I am a little envious of Egon's convictions, of his simplicity, and glad, in a way, that he has joined the conspiracy. Dearest, if Destiny had dealt differently with us we might have been as true-hearted, as open, as those two. It is not our fault that we have set the world's law at defiance—I will not admit it! It is the fault of that Power which plays with human lives. And yet, my Anaïs, Egon's love cannot be a quarter of that which I give you! We lose much, we have sinned perhaps much; but, beloved, our hearts are closer, our love has

a consecration of its own. Write often, dear. If I were not your lover I should find your letters charming ; as it is, the perfume of the paper intoxicates me and I could kiss every word—perhaps I do sometimes, when nobody is there to see! If you knew how I loved the very turns of your writing—the queer way in which you form an H, for instance—no one else ever wrote it like that ! Is it because you knew that H was to be the dearest letter in your life ? As for me, I should like to inscribe every A in gold, or, better still, strike it from every word but Anaïs as too sacred for common use. Am I talking nonsense ? Forgive me, dear wisdom, but indeed the language of the heart is beyond mere sense. It is the hour for outpost duty. Farewell, dear love ! I must go from heaven to earth, for to speak with you, even with pen and paper, is paradise.”

Ostenburg seemed to bear a charmed life. He was in the forefront of every engagement yet never wounded, and little by little Anaïs took comfort from his immunity. After Aspern he gained the Cross of the Legion of Honour, pinned on his breast by Napoleon’s own hands, with words of praise more costly than even the decoration. He wrote of Vienna, of Schoenbrunn, touching lightly on his own exploits, which Anaïs learned from the General’s simple, enthusiastic epistles and from common report.

“ Am I not proud of you, my hero ? ” she wrote to him. “ I knew the Emperor had but to see you to acknowledge your power, for genius recognises genius by intuition. How hard it is when they speak of you not to cry in triumph ‘ That is the man I love ! ’ And yet, if the world praises, do I not praise with fuller knowledge ? I know at least that you value my praise above that of the world. It is enough to make me vain

to know that you, whom the world adores, think of nothing but one woman ! Am I to take you at your word ? Surely not altogether, for it is right that you should enjoy the world's plaudits, and I wish you to do so. There is someone else who shares my pride, though she does not guess that it is a case of sharing—your mother, Heinz. Since she came to Cassel in April she and I have been great friends, though sometimes I am afraid before her proud, stern eyes. If she knew the truth she would not welcome me as she does ! And yet I love her and reverence her with all my heart—for your sake, Heinz, yours. If we could only kneel before her and confess our love ! She scorns deceit, and, dear, it is for my sake that her son has done that which merits her scorn. Can you forgive me ? It is too dreadful to think of—I will not speak of it any more. We cannot undo the past, even if we would. Would you if you could ? You will say ' No ! ' and I say ' No ! ' too—I trust that we are at one in that. Your mother loves you, Heinz, the more dearly for her reticence, her apparent sternness. I, who love you, too, guess that, for sometimes she melts to me,—she is fond of me, you know,—and tells little anecdotes of your boyhood, not thinking how dear they are to me, or quotes your words, or speaks of your military exploits.

“ We hear that Egon has joined the standard of the Duke of Brunswick. The fear lest he should be captured has been dreadful for Veronika, with all the condemnations of the courts-martial ringing in her ears. No mercy has been shown the insurgents ; even women have been imprisoned, and Marianne von Stein was, we hear, almost incarcerated in the Salpêtrière. Karoline von Baumbach has been released by the payment of twelve thousand francs. It is a terrible time—on every

side friends suspected, and really guilty. I admire Veronika's courage ; she never flinches, though it must be awful for her. News of the war is awaited anxiously by everyone ; how much more then by me ? ”

CHAPTER XXII

THE TWO WOMEN WHO LOVED HEINZ VON OSTENBURG

IT happened that on a certain summer evening Veronika had gone to visit Anaïs with the intention of borrowing a book which Frau von Barby wished to read. The friends had not been so much together lately ; Anaïs, absorbed in her anxiety for Ostenburg, —an anxiety which she could not share with her friend or in any way express,—shrank before the girl's honest eyes ; and Veronika herself, occupied by care of her mother, who since the shock of Fritz's death had been continually in ill health, and by fear for Egon, who now held the first place in her thoughts, noticed this less than she would have done under other circumstances.

As they sat together now, the talk fell on those terrible days of Anaïs's girlhood which had left an ineradicable mark upon her heart. She spoke of her mother, whom she had learned to love in prison better than in all the time of prosperity ; of the tender women who went out to die as if it were to a dance at Versailles ; the men who passed to the guillotine with a jest on their lips.

" I remember one man who shrieked when the moment came," she said. " We were all ashamed. A young boy, almost a child, went without a word, bowing gaily to us ladies. And the beautiful Queen, my godmother,—she was the bravest of all, they said."

"Yes; that was true courage," said Veronika. "Just to go and know that in a few moments one's life would be at an end—that would be worse than dying in battle! Anaïs, you would have gone bravely, too!"

"I trust so—I hope so. After all, one could not show fear to that *canaille*! But I was never tried; the fever saved me. Veronika, when I awoke and found that my turn was passed I was sorry!"

"Sorry?"

"Yes; because all my friends were gone, and I had been separated, I thought for ever, from one I loved better than all the rest."

Veronika caught her hand and stroked it softly.

"We were betrothed," continued Anaïs, moved by some sudden impulse to speak. "That was before the trouble came. We loved each other as you and Egon do. Oh, it was cruel, cruel!"

"What happened? Did he die?"

Anaïs covered her face with her hands.

"Don't ask me any more," she said. "I thought he was dead."

There was silence, and in the silence a vague fear seized upon Veronika. She suddenly remembered that ring at Ostenburg. What did it all mean?

"Did you ever meet again?" something impelled her to ask.

Anaïs raised her face from her hands, but she made no answer. A moment later a clatter of hoofs sounded up the street and paused at Madame Duclos's door.

"Letters!" she cried, starting up.

"There is also one for Mademoiselle," said ToINETTE, as she brought the packet up and handed it to her mistress. "Knowing she was here I asked the postman. There has been a great battle, Madame.

The Austrians are defeated. The news has only just come."

"A battle? Bring lights!" cried Anaïs, while Veronika tore open her letter. The candles were lit, and almost involuntarily Anaïs gave a little cry of disappointment; the writing on her packet was only that of the General. She grew pale and broke the seal. Veronika's "Thank God, he's safe—with the Duke of Brunswick, as we heard!" rang warmly through the room, even while Anaïs, with white lips and straining eyes, was trying to snatch the sense of her husband's ill-written scrawl. "Not a word of him!" she murmured. Veronika was absorbed in Egon's letter when a sudden cry startled her. She sprang forward and caught Anaïs's swaying form in her arms.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"He's wounded, Veronika—he's wounded! Oh, he will die—I know it!"

"The General?" exclaimed Veronika. "Is it he?"

The name which rose to Anaïs's lips made her brain reel with horror. She understood now, in a flash of illumination which seemed to burn to her very soul. Her face grew white and set. Anaïs looked at her and quivered.

"Ah, it's wrong—I know it!" she cried. "But we have an excuse! It was Heinz to whom I was betrothed when we were boy and girl. I have never loved anyone else."

Veronika looked down at her, and suddenly with her grief and horror mingled a great pity. She was face to face for the first time with one of life's deepest tragedies.

"Oh, Anaïs, it's too dreadful!" she cried. "I can't think, I can't understand."

Anaïs caught at her hand, sobbing. "He's

wounded !” she cried again. “ Oh, I cannot bear to lose him !” Then, in a moment, she grew calm and white and still. “ I know — you cannot be my friend after this,” she whispered very sadly. “ You must go. I must face this alone. Good-bye, Veronika !”

The girl gave a sob and went, too much stunned to wait or question. Anaïs sank down on a chair and buried her face in her hands. Her first impulse had been to fly to Ostenburg’s side, but as she grew calmer she saw that it was impossible. She waited a week, a fortnight, in agonising suspense, and there was better news. The wound proved not severe, and soon Heinz wrote himself to say that he was coming home to recruit the strength which did not permit of his continuing in active service. He was torn between regret at losing the chances of war and delight at seeing Anaïs again.

Then one day, when by chance Madame de Monticourt was visiting Frau von Ostenburg, a letter came, written by Veit, and saying that Ostenburg was dangerously ill at Frankfurt ; the wound had inflamed on the journey, and he was in a high fever. With characteristic promptitude and calmness the Freifrau packed her belongings and all those things which might be useful in illness, and set out in her carriage to nurse her beloved son.

Madame de Monticourt was on her way to visit Madame Duclos. A mischievous impulse made her, with seeming carelessness, impart the news she had just heard. With an icy hand gripping at her heart Anaïs summoned up strength to act indifference with such success that Madame de Monticourt gave the lie to gossip, but when her visitor went she ordered her carriage and started for Frankfurt. She could endure to

wait no longer; desperation drove her to Ostenburg's side.

In the inn at Frankfurt, Heinz lay raging with fever. Veit was the indefatigable nurse of so beloved a master, watching day and night by the bedside, and deft as a woman in his ministrations. It was evening. The shaded lamp burned low, and through the chinks of the curtained window Veit saw the clear moonlight which bathed the world. He sat waiting, chin on hand, the arrival of the Freifrau ; her coming would take a weight from his heart. He scarcely listened to the broken murmurs which fell from the sick man's lips, nor would he have traced their meaning had he heard. To save Ostenburg was his only thought, and if to secure that valuable life he might have paid his own, the faithful servant would have done it willingly. Perhaps Heinz held a little lightly the devotion he had won less by exertion than by the peculiar charm of his nature and the potency of his name, and yet that devotion might be of untold worth to him in the years to come, when bereft of all that he now held most dear. We have cause to be grateful for even the meanest love that is offered us.

At last there was a stir without and a knocking at the door of the ante-room. Veit sprang up and opened it guardedly, finger on lip, but it was the Freifrau who stood on the threshold and swept past him through the outer apartment to her son's side. The servant stood in silence while she fell on her knees by the sick man. He knew her not, for even as she touched his hand he moaned " Anaïs—Anaïs !" The mother started—she thought the delirium had carried him back to his boyhood and his boyhood's betrothed, and it gave her a strange pang that the name of a dead girl should be on

his lips rather than her own. She neither wept nor spoke, but all the pride and love of years were summed up in the kiss she pressed on Heinz's forehead—a rare caress, equal to the most passionate demonstration of another woman. Then she rose and, beckoning Veit to the outer room, asked him in a low voice questions about the course of the illness, the doctor's opinion, the medicines that had been ordered, with perfect calmness and clearness. She learned that the doctor had just paid his visit and would come again in the early morning ; he believed that the crisis of the fever was at hand and that if the Freiherr could live through the night all would be well.

“ It seems I come at the right moment,” she said. “ You have served your master well, Veit ; you need rest. Go now and sleep till the morning. I will watch by the Herr Freiherr.”

“ But, gracious lady,—” Veit ventured to protest.

She cut him short, saying :

“ I will call you if there be need. Your room is close at hand ? That is well. You will be better able to help me when you are rested, and I see that you have not spared yourself. Thank you for your faithful service ! ”

He bowed and went ; the Freifrau von Ostenburg was never disobeyed.

The mother returned to the inner room and sat down on the chair which Veit had drawn close to the bed. Even thus alone her calm did not give way, though there was a great pain at her heart. No one guessed the intensity of her love for Heinz — a love rooted in pride and watered by a kind of friendship rare in any relation. The hours passed ; she watched, rising once and again to smooth the bed, or to hold a glass of water

to the lips of the sick man, in whom her anxious eyes could see no change. Once and again, too, a shade of pain crossed her white, handsome face as he breathed the name which on entering had struck upon her ears, —“ Anaïs ! ” That was the only shadow between them, the shadow of the French girl whom Heinz had loved — a shadow dispelled, as she thought, by the years, but in his delirium rising again. Why had he loved the girl so ? Why was not “ Mother ! ” the cry of his distress ? Even when she laid her cool hand on his he did not know her. His eyes were bright and wild, his pulse rapid and fitful. The Freifrau knew enough of illness to see only too clearly that his life hung in the balance. His life ! And he left no son to the ancient name. If she must needs cry, “ *Le roi est mort !* ” the reply, “ *Vive le roi !* ” would echo to an alien ear, the ear of an Ostenburg, true, but of a collateral branch in a family proud of direct succession. With folded hands she prayed for him ; a grave piety underlay all her life, a faith perhaps colourless, stern, but firm, unerring and very real to her, and the short petition which rose from her heart was as earnest as the broken appeals of a more emotional woman.

Presently a sound of voices stirred the night ; a hurried step paused by the door of the outer chamber ; then someone entered. Thinking that it might be the doctor, Frau von Ostenburg raised the lamp and went to the door which she opened. To her surprise a veiled woman fell at her feet, crying :

“ He lives ! Tell me that he lives ! ”

The Freifrau frowned and laid a finger on her lips.

“ You have made a mistake,” she said coldly.

The woman caught her hand with a despairing grasp and the hood fell back. Frau von Ostenburg started.

"Madame Duclos!" she exclaimed. "What does this mean?"

Anaïs sprang up.

"Let me go to him, Madame!" she besought, with clasped hands. "Oh, he is not dead!"

The Freifrau barred the way.

"Madame, I do not know what this means, nor do I wish to know. My son lies between life and death in that room. You have no right there!"

Anaïs tried to push her aside, to force her way, but the old lady held her back with terrible scorn on her brow.

"Madame, this is madness," she said. "You have no right to pass me. I am Herr von Ostenburg's mother!"

"No right! Hark, he's calling me! Madame, I have the right of love to be near him! My name again! Let me pass!"

"You are mistaken. It is not your name that he calls, but the name of a girl to whom he was betrothed many years ago. You must go quietly, Madame! Think what would be said if it were known that you were here!"

Anaïs laughed wildly, crying:

"Do I care what they say when his life is in the balance? The world may say what it will if I may only see him again—speak to him again! They cannot say more than the truth—that I love him! Madame, you do not understand—it is my name that he calls, because I once was Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire. Let me go to him!"

Frau von Ostenburg still barred the way.

"Why did he never tell me that?" she said. "You! You Anaïs de Sainte-Élisaire! Madame Du-

clos, if you love him still, God help you ! If he loves you, God help you both ! But my son's room is sacred to me, his mother. You cannot come ! ”

There was a pause, and the eyes of the two women met in deadly conflict : those of the Freifrau cold, dry, and stern, Madame Duclos's passionate and wet with tears. It seemed as if an angel of judgment barred the way of paradise to some trembling human soul.

At last on the silence broke a cry from the inner chamber — “ Anaïs ! ” Anaïs could bear no more ; she thrust the Freifrau aside and flung herself on her knees beside the bed. Heinz feebly turned to her with the shadow of a smile on his haggard face and moved his hand on the counterpane. He had not known his mother, but he knew Anaïs. She bent and kissed his hands, holding them in her own, and the Freifrau, for her son's sake, dared not move her. Yet, as she watched, her brow grew dark with jealousy, and her heart was very bitter against the woman who had come between her and her son—no longer the shadow of a memory evoked from the past, but a living, breathing woman, who usurped her place beside the sick man.

Ostenburg's breath grew calmer, his head fell back on the pillow, his hands relaxed their hold, and after a little while the watchers saw that he slept. The crisis of the malady had come and passed favourably. In silence they waited—antagonists joined in one hope, one desire—until the dawn struggled feebly through the curtains and the lamp grew dim. When the doctor came Anaïs withdrew her hands and, covering her head with the hood of her cloak, stood by the window, silent save for the “ Thank God ! ” that trembled on her lips when he pronounced the danger passed. As soon as they were again alone the Freifrau went out

for a few moments ; when she returned Anaïs was by the bed, praying, it seemed, with clasped hands. With a glance of bitterest enmity the elder woman beckoned her to the outer room. She obeyed slowly, first bending lovingly over the sleeper and touching his fingers softly with her lips.

"Madame, your carriage will be ready immediately," said Frau von Ostenburg, in a cold, formal tone. "You will, of course, return to Cassel."

Anaïs bent her head in silence.

"You need not fear but that I shall keep the events of to-night secret," continued the Freifrau. "I advise you, Madame, in the future to act more in accordance with the dictates of prudence and honour. Whatever may have once been the tie between my son and yourself, you are now divided by all that Christians call holy : your duty is owed to your husband. When the Freiherr is fit for such a discussion, I shall bring all the weight of my authority to bear on him, so that he may break off a connection which is disgraceful both to him and to you, and into which, I do not doubt, he has been led against his better judgment."

Anaïs drew herself up very proudly and scanned the Freifrau from head to foot. She opened her lips as if about to speak, but then sighed with a deep breath and made a formal reverence. She had no answer to make to the words that stung her, no defence that this woman, inexorable as Fate, would admit, and yet she knew that Heinz would abate no jot or tittle of his love, even at his mother's bidding. They had met in deadly conflict and she had conquered.

"Madame," she said at last, "if I answered the charge you bring against me you would not do me justice. I will leave Heinz to answer you. I have

fulfilled my errand—I have seen him and he lives. I ask no mercy of you, and I expect none. You can tell the world no more than the truth. Madame, good-bye.”

She went to the door and closed it softly behind her. Frau von Ostenburg returned to her son's side and watched for his awakening.

CHAPTER XXIII

OSTENBURG REFUSES TO MAKE A PROMISE

AS soon as Heinz could bear the journey his mother moved him to Ostenburg. She was not unwilling to prolong his convalescence, for while he was weak enough to enjoy being a child her jealousy of the woman who had come between them might be at rest. Indeed, as he had spoken no word of Madame Duclos, the Freifrau almost believed that he had not known of her visit, or that his recognition had been so faint as to be mingled with the delusions of fever. She could not fail to rejoice in this, though she knew that before Heinz returned to Cassel the subject must be opened between them, and it was perhaps only natural that she, laying the greater blame to the woman's charge, began to think his heart not so deeply touched as Anaïs had said.

For the present there were many other things for them to discuss : the Freifrau heard every detail of the campaign, questioned much concerning the Emperor—the Corsican peasant she had scorned but now regarded more favourably in the light of his appreciation of her son ; was interested in hearing of Vienna and Schoenbrunn, and proud of the gallantry which had won Heinz the little enamelled Cross of the Legion of Honour. On her side there was the news of Dörnberg's insurrection to be told, an insurrection with

which she had a secret sympathy—her German spirit revolting against the foreign rule, even while she thought it the man's part to abide bravely by the political party he had chosen and the woman's to follow his lead without question. Egon's fate was a matter of deep interest to both, and the Freifrau thought highly of him that he should have flung away the chance of promotion and the possibility of a speedy union with the woman he loved for conscience' sake and his country's good. But at the time of Ostenburg's illness a material change had come to his prospects: the elder brother, the Graf von Pustau, had been killed by a fall from his horse, leaving only two daughters, and the younger brother in consequence succeeded to the title and estates. His friends were now exerting all their influence to obtain his pardon and permission to return to Westphalia, for Egon, seeing that the German cause, for the present at least, was hopeless, and feeling that home duties were in this case the more imperative, was willing to leave the Duke of Brunswick's army and live for a time quietly on his estate. It was hardly a secret that his return would be followed very shortly by his marriage with Veronika von Barby, and Ostenburg was indefatigable in the cause of a pardon, which his great services in the French army gave him the right to ask—not only for Egon's sake, but because in so doing he seemed to make some slight reparation for the shadow which Fritz's loss had thrown upon Veronika's life.

It was on the evening before his return to Cassel that a letter from Fürstenstein was brought to him. He broke the seal eagerly, and read the contents with an exclamation of pleasure.

"We have conquered, *Frau Mutter*," he said to the

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Freifrau, who was sitting industriously at her spinning-wheel. "Egon is pardoned, on the condition that he no longer bears arms against France and never enters Cassel."

"The best we could expect. This is excellent news, my son!"

"I shall be able to announce it to Fräulein von Barby to-morrow. I dare say Egon will be quite content to remain in the country with such a wife to keep him company! We need not pity his banishment too much!"

The Freifrau smiled.

"He's a good lad—a good lad!" she said. "I am glad for his happiness."

Heinz was already busied in opening another letter and, by some swift intuition of jealousy, the Freifrau guessed the writer. The smile faded from her face, for she felt that a duty long-postponed must be delayed no longer; she must speak of that which had come so strangely to her knowledge.

"My son, I have something to say to you," she began, while her keen eyes rested without flinching on his face.

He looked up, and she saw a strange glow on his countenance, as of one recalled from dreams of glory.

"Yes, *Frau Mutter*?" he said.

"When you were ill, my son, you let fall in your delirium many things which were strange to me."

He started, saying,—

"Ah!—what sort of things?"

She went on firmly:

"One name was constantly on your lips. Perhaps you can guess the name I mean."

He understood; the possibility of this very thing had already crossed his mind.

"And if it was, *Frau Mutter*?" he asked slowly.

"If it was, Heinz, you love a woman whom you have no right to love."

He rose and paced the room in deep and troubled thought, then paused before his mother.

"I never thought to have spoken of this to you," he said at last. "But now that it has come let us be open with one another. I had a dream in my fever that *she* kneeled beside me and touched my hand. Was it a true dream, mother?"

"It was true, my son."

Her jealousy was quick to see the tenderness which transfigured his face for an instant as he breathed: "She came!"

"You have received letters from her, I believe," she continued coldly. "Has she not told you that?"

"Not a word. I wonder why! You saw her?"

The *Freifrau* assented.

"And you sent her away?"

"I sent her back to her duty. Heinz, you must break with this Frenchwoman! No doubt the fault was on her side——"

"Mother, spare me that," he interrupted. "What blame there is, is mine alone."

"Then the more shame to you! Is this loyalty to your friend, the honest General? Is it fit that the *Freiherr* von Ostenburg should engage in a common intrigue such as are, without doubt, fashionable at the Westphalian Court? Is the name of Ostenburg to be degraded with those of Jerome Bonaparte's minions? Heinz, you have not acted as became you!"

"*Frau Mutter*, I have no defence save that I love her, but my love has at least this excuse, that it began innocently when we were boy and girl together in Paris."

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"She told me that. But I see no excuse—only the greater condemnation. Why did you make a secret of her identity with Mademoiselle de Sainte-Élisaire?"

"I thought it better. Perhaps, Mother, I had not the courage to ask a sympathy which I knew that you could not give me. You were always hard, even cruel, about my betrothal,—it's the only thing in which you have ever been cruel or unjust to me,—and so I could not come to you for counsel when I found that—that the woman I loved was not dead."

"I wish she had died! It would have been better both for you and her than this—this disgrace. I could have forgiven you sooner had you carried her off and declared your love in the face of day. That would have been brave at least—better than deceit and clandestine correspondence!"

"How willingly would I have done that, Mother! But she would not let me ruin my career for her sake; she was too unselfish!"

The Freifrau's self-control broke down, for perhaps the only time in her life.

"Heinz, are you mad?" she cried impatiently. "Has the woman bewitched you? I never thought to hear my son speak so!"

"And if your son speaks so," he answered rather sadly, "is it not because Fate has been too hard for him? Mother, it is beyond a man's strength to be sane sometimes!"

She clasped her hands together in despair at his words, and her grey eyes blazed.

"Heinz, will you not come back to reason?" she said. "I have spoken of this disgraceful affair only that I might end it. I know you honour me as your mother!"

"How much!" he cried, stooping to kiss her hand.

"Then I require you, by your love for me, to promise that you will not see Madame Duclos again, or write to her."

He caught his breath and stood rigid with clenched hands and strange, sad eyes.

"Mother, I would give you my life," he said at last, very slowly, and in a queer, strained voice. "I would give you anything on earth that it were in my power to give—anything but that promise. That is impossible!"

"Impossible!" she echoed. "Heinz, is your infatuation for a frivolous woman stronger than honour, stronger than what is due to your name, stronger even than the respect which you owe to me?"

He smiled strangely.

"Stronger than life, Mother; stronger than death!"

How he loved Anaïs! A spasm of pain crossed the Freifrau's face. Her sense of right and wrong was so quickened by jealousy that her son should set anyone above herself, that the two became inextricably confounded—the nobler instinct with the baser and more personal.

"Then you refuse me?" she asked in a low, stern voice.

Something in the tone struck at his heart, and, regardless of the reserve which usually ruled their intercourse, he flung himself at her feet and caught the hand which hung at her side.

"Ask of me anything else!" he cried passionately. "Ask anything I can give, but not this. This is more than life to me! Mother, be merciful! Would it be honourable in me to give her up, to cast her love aside, hers, who risked all to come to me when she thought me dying?"

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It was not easy to break from the influence which had swayed a lifetime, and in that moment Anaïs won a victory of which, had she cared for such triumphs, she might have been proud. The Freifrau looked down at him and deigned to use the last weapon over which she had power—his love itself.

“That was an act of ill-considered madness,” she said. “It will be best for her, as for you, never to meet again. If you will not promise for my sake, Heinz, promise for hers!”

He sprang up and paced the room again.

“Never to see her—never to speak to her—to leave her in the midst of people who do not understand! No, that would not make her happy! *Frau Mutter*, she seems to you gay, careless, brilliant,—you do not know her real self,—so tender, so sensitive, so easily wounded. No! Until she bids me go, I am bound to her service. The matter is beyond my power now. I am not free even if I wished for freedom.”

There was silence for a space—silence through which the hooting of an owl without sounded weirdly. Then the Freifrau rose and looked her son full in the face. She was too proud to plead, to reason with him any longer. She had stooped in vain to the weapon of Anaïs's welfare—she would stoop no further.

“I see that I cannot move you,” she said. “I have shown you your duty; even a mother cannot do more. We have to pay the penalty of every sin sooner or later—and not alone we ourselves, but sometimes the innocent, too, for not one of us stands so much alone but that he must drag others in his fall. Some day you will pay the price which must be exacted for this, and perhaps then you will regret that you refused to make me a promise. You have grieved me, my son, for the

Ostenburgs are brave people, and you have not been brave in this. I never thought to call my son a coward, but I fear you have earned the name. No," as he made a movement to interrupt her, "say no more. The subject is closed between us for ever, until the day when you can make the promise that you have refused me now. Good-night."

He opened the door for her in silence and kissed her hand ceremoniously as she passed. She had cut him the more that he felt the truth of her words; the Freiherr von Ostenburg had been a coward. He mused on what she had said, "A penalty to pay!" If it were only that! If the penalty were for himself alone, he could bear it willingly—Anaïs loved him! But the innocent might suffer, too, and there was Fritz in his grave. He shuddered as that scene in the hut rose again before him, as he felt the eyes of the dying lad fixed again on his. Sometimes he could hardly endure the terror of that burden which, for Anaïs's sake, he must bear alone.

The graver mood, the remorse, the self-reproach lay far behind when he met her at the royal ball next night, exquisite and tremulous. What were to him the congratulations which showered upon him, the smiles of ladies-in-waiting, the Queen's kind speeches, or the King's marked graciousness? The latest scandal of Cassel barely interested him, Dörnberg's revolt was hardly to be considered, and Egon's pardon almost slipped his memory, though he had announced it with pleasure enough to Veronika. Anaïs's smile, Anaïs's approval, Anaïs's thankfulness for his recovery, were now all the world to him.

He led her to a gallery where they might speak without observation during the progress of a dance.

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"Why did you never tell me that you came?" he asked her.

"I don't know," she replied hesitating. "You never spoke of it in your letters. I thought perhaps that you had not recognised me, or had forgotten in your illness. Besides, I wanted you to hear it from your mother, unmoved by what I might say. She was very angry!"

"She only told me last night."

"And she asked you never to see me again."

He started.

"How do you know that, Anaïs?" he cried.

"Because I read her heart that night. One woman cannot deceive another, and we both loved you. I ought to have set you free, but—but I could not! And now I cannot! I knew you would refuse to make her the promise she asked."

"I did refuse; it was beyond my power. And now, when I owe my life, my health to you!"

"And you are well?" she said, looking at him anxiously. "Quite well again? Oh, it was awful to hear that you were wounded—to see you lying there!"

He reassured her of his perfect recovery.

"Heinz, Heinz, I am so happy that I am almost afraid!" she said presently. "Some day we shall have to suffer for such happiness!"

The Freifrau's words came to his mind, "A penalty to pay!" Yes; but surely their love was worth it! Surely, too, it must fall on him alone, and the delicate, tender Anaïs must escape unscathed! With the force born of a secret fear he bade her look away from such sad fancies, bade her be content with present happiness, with the assurance of his undying love! She yielded to his mood, and the shadow passed from her face as he led her back to the ballroom.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GRAF AND GRÄFIN VON PUSTAU RECEIVE A GUEST

ON an October evening in the year 1811, Egon von Pustau was sitting with his wife in her parlour, reading the *Moniteur de Westphalie* while she played with her year-old son on the floor at his feet. They had been married almost immediately after Egon's return—for Frau von Barby's ill health made her anxious to see Veronika happily settled—and had lived ever since very quietly on the Pustau estate, waiting for a turn of the tide which might allow Egon again to fight for his country, and working in secret for the furtherance of the *Tugendbund*. Until her death in the preceding winter, Frau von Barby had made their home hers; utterly broken by the loss of her son, she had no wish to live, and, having taken Veronika's child in her arms, she had no further hold on life. Her memory, like a delicate painting of perfect workmanship, was set beside those of the soldier-father and of the young brother in Veronika's heart, and though the first poignancy of grief might fade, the memory would be immortal.

Veronika was superbly happy in her marriage; when Egon sometimes reproached himself for having torn her from the society she adorned to the solitude of what was practically banishment, she would smile at

him proudly, and tell him that she was glad—yes, glad to be free from it. She was one of those women who make themselves duties wherever Fate may set their lives, and in such duties find happiness. Her brilliant time had passed ; she had enjoyed to the full admiration, reckless gaiety, the exchange of edged words, and now, with the man whose silent, faithful love had won her own, she was content to be the Lady Bountiful of a large estate, to tend with her never-failing sympathy and strength the spiritual and bodily needs of her dependants, to work and hope for the cause which she felt must surely triumph in the end. She was of a temper which mere frivolity could never satisfy ; the realities of life must touch her sooner or later, the calls of blood and country ring in her ears, and with a characteristic energy and whole-heartedness she made answer, capable of rising to heroism for the sacred cause. But the brilliant aspects of her character did not sink as the more serious ones rose beside them ; her natural wit flashed as brightly for Egon's ear as for the most brilliant assembly in Cassel, for it was the outcome of no conscious intellectual effort, but the spontaneous product of her being. She must needs stand out an individual wherever she might be, even though she submitted to Egon as those who had known her in her self-willed girlhood could hardly believe, and in such submission learned to love him more tenderly day by day. The child, too, awoke all that was gentle and beautiful in her nature to a new and more vigorous life.

It was a pretty sight to see her playing with the little, red-haired thing, who held her strong white fingers in his, and laughed over the pictures that she showed him in a queer old book. Egon let his paper slip

and watched them with an amused smile, then stooped over and kissed the glowing hair that shone with greater lustre above Veronika's mourning garments.

"I shall grow jealous of Heinzchen soon," he said playfully. "You never look at me now!"

She repaid him for the neglect by an eloquent glance.

"Where's the real Heinz?" she said. "Why has he not come yet?"

Egon pulled out his watch, saying:

"He ought to be here! He comes only from Ostenburg to-day!"

"He will have much to tell us! I suppose this war when it comes will mean fresh distinction for him."

"Everything seems to mean distinction for Ostenburg. What a career his has been! A series of brilliant actions."

"If he would but have dedicated his brilliance to a better cause," sighed Veronika.

"We cannot judge for others. But to Germany he would have been of untold value. He is the bravest man I know!"

"No, Egon, not the bravest! Herr von Ostenburg is a brave soldier, if you will, but not a brave man. He has never withstood inclination, never been in the truest sense chivalrous. You know that I like him, that we are friends, real friends; but there's something lacking in his nature—strength, courage, what can I call it? Egon, if you had been he, you would not have stayed in Cassel after meeting Anaïs Duclos."

"Ah, you're thinking of that story! It's a sad one. And yet—and yet, it's hard to blame him altogether. I wonder if you and I had been separated and united after many years——"

"We cannot know our strength or our weakness

until it is tried ! I don't judge them harshly, Egon, but I pity them—I pity her ! He was the most to blame, and that is why I do not call him brave. Anaïs was too gentle, too trusting, to resist—and she loved him ! Yes, the pity of that day when I first knew the truth—when the news came of his wound at Wagram and she broke down and sobbed before me ! She loved him with all her heart ! He should not have made her love him so ! Egon, do you know—do they meet still ? ”

He bent his head in assent, saying :

“ Still, the affair is known everywhere—the only person ignorant of it is the General. He will discover it some day—he must. They write constantly, I believe.”

“ And there will be a duel and—oh, it's horrible, horrible ! One has to sit with folded hands. What can one do ? ”

“ Nothing, dearest. I did my best long ago. Heinz never speaks of her to me.”

“ Nor she in her letters of him. Perhaps if I could see her, reason with her——”

“ It would only be worse. And, Veronika, with this scandal known you could not ask her here.”

“ *He* comes, Egon ! If I could help her, what should I care for scandal ? ”

Egon interrupted :

“ Hark, I hear wheels—he is here ! ”

He hastened from the room to greet his old friend ; Heinz sprang up the steps and embraced him heartily. He wore plain clothes, without either sword or medals.

“ I am here *sub rosa*,—owing to your political opinions, old fellow,” he explained, as they went towards the parlour. “ I ought not to visit you, at

least it must not be known. But I think my loyalty is above proof and, risk or no risk, I would not allow politics to divide such old friends as you and I."

"I should be very sorry if they did!" said Pustau, opening the door for him to pass.

Heinz hastened forward to kiss Veronika's hand.

"Frau Gräfin, you don't know how glad I am to be under your roof again," he said with a smile that lit his rather worn face strangely.

"We are very glad to welcome you," she answered, scanning his tall, slight figure. He had that indefinable quality which made other men seem commonplace beside him. Even to Veronika's partial eyes Egon's good looks paled, and she strove in vain to account for the impression.

"And this is my godson," continued the Freiherr, bending to kiss the child, then lifting him up in his arms. "Why, Heinzchen, you are twice the size you were when I saw you in the spring! Frau Gräfin, he has your hair and eyes; Egon won't mind my thinking that he will not be the less handsome on that account!"

Veronika smiled, saying,—

"You learn the art of compliment in Paris, Freiherr!" Then in a lower voice, "We think him like Fritz, sometimes."

The Freiherr's face darkened and he bent his head. There was an instant's silence.

"We must congratulate you on your promotion, General," Veronika said presently, laying a stress on the title. She had thought to be a little cold, a little stern towards him, but she liked him too well not to let her sternness melt in his presence and beneath the rare charm of his manner. "The French Emperor is

a good judge of soldiers, and he has not given you more than you deserve."

"That 's a magnanimous saying from the lips of an—enemy!"

"Not an enemy to you, Freiherr—an enemy to France!"

A shade of sadness crossed his face.

"Perhaps you have chosen best," he said quickly.

"But I must hold by the eagles to which I have sworn."

He sat down and let the child stay on his knee. Heinzchen caught at his fob and played contentedly with the seals and rings attached to it.

"The boy will not usually be happy with strangers," said Egon; "you have won his heart."

"He knows we are going to be great friends. Listen, godson! What do you think my watch is saying?"

He held the heavy gold case to the baby's ear and stroked the little red-gold head tenderly. Veronika watched them with a curious light in her eyes.

"A man whom children love cannot be wholly bad," she said to Egon afterwards. "There is something noble in Heinz von Ostenburg. He would have been a fine character had Fate not proved too hard for him!"

Egon looked into his wife's eyes, saying:

"He would have been a fine character if you had married him, dearest. I sometimes wonder why you did not! He is a cleverer man than I; you and he talk together of things which I do not understand—which I never think of! Why did you refuse him?"

"I suppose because he was not the right man," Veronika answered with a smile. "And yet, Egon—you

have a right to know the truth—it hurt me for a while to do it; he fascinated me, he charmed my imagination. Once even I thought that I loved him. Remember that I was very young.”

Egon caught her hand and kissed it.

“Oh, you need not be jealous,” she said. “He never loved me; I knew that, and I was too proud not to want a man’s whole love.”

“If I could not give you much, at least I could give you that!” Pustau said. “But my gain was his loss.”

“Not altogether his loss. I could not have saved him from himself. He did not love me, and he would have met Anaïs.”

“And yet I sometimes think he regrets what might have been. He admires you—I know that!”

“Perhaps he does; but there is only one woman in all the world for him—only one. His love has at least the merit of being faithful.”

Heinz von Ostenburg was very faithful. Through all the vicissitudes of the last two years one hope, one joy, one inspiration to heroic acts had been his, and had seemed more to him than any distinction the world could give. He had come through the campaign of Portugal unwounded and with new honours; the Emperor trusted him, and had given him command of a cavalry regiment under Murat. By a curious coincidence General Duclos had also left the Westphalian service, and his wife was again living in Paris while he was at the front. Heinz had seen her last on his way home on leave and was glad that a reappointment to the Emperor’s staff would permit him in all probability to spend the winter in Paris.

He stayed at Pustau more than a week, drifting on

from day to day and making himself with his peculiar adaptability a part of their life. Little Heinz adored him and from his lips first learned to stammer a word or two, Egon and he seemed to renew their boyhood, and Veronika softened towards him as she saw the intense sadness, the terrible regret, which crossed his face sometimes when a new phase of their happiness struck upon him. There was perhaps a certain fascination for the man to whom Fate had denied such happiness in lingering over that of his friends, even though the fascination was a painful one. What might not his life have been under such conditions ! What a wretched thing it seemed now by contrast with this calm, noble union !

One morning he had gone for a long stroll through the woods with Veronika. They talked, as they often did, of the right and wrong of the great struggle which convulsed Europe, and Veronika did not hesitate to tell him that she would think better of him if he left the French army and came to the defence of his Fatherland. He listened deferentially to her arguments and admired her grasp of the subject, yet defended himself for his choice and strove to win from her appreciation of the great Emperor.

"Yes, yes, he's worthy enough as a foe," she said. "But only as a foe for us, and it would be more fitting to your name, Freiherr, if you regarded him in that light."

"Germany has a fine champion in you, Gräfin—a finer champion than she deserves ! Long ago I lost all bonds of country ; I am as much a Frenchman as a German. Indeed, it's as disloyal for a Frenchman to serve Napoleon as it is for a German ; he is a usurper, an upstart. But I and many others serve neither

country nor dynasty; we serve the greatest man of our age."

She bent her eyes on him sorrowfully, for, reading between the lines, she knew that a woman held him to the enemy's camp.

"But we are never free from the bonds of birth and patriotism," she said. "No individual can break these!"

"Surely a man has no obligation to serve a weak cause—a cause he cannot respect!"

"Freiherr, a righteous cause may be weak, for success is not the measure of righteousness."

"It is the measure of power. Need we look beyond?"

"Yes—a thousand times, yes!" she flashed out. "A man is the better for upholding a good cause, however hopeless it may be. Have not the hopeless causes roused up the truest heroism? What of the Stuarts? Freiherr, I will not believe that you are as worldly as you pretend!"

He sighed, saying:

"You think too highly of me. I am a worldling from head to foot. I cannot but worship greatness."

"Yet the man who serves failure is greater than he who serves success."

He grew grave on a sudden, saying:

"I see what you mean. In your sense I am not, nor ever shall be, a great man. But it is no use to struggle against our fate."

"That's a poor doctrine!"

"But a true one! Veronika—you will let me call you that, will you not? for the sake of old times!—you are of the stuff that heroes are made of. You would fight to the death for an ideal, a magnificent falsehood.

Teach your son that doctrine and he will be happy ! Teach him—teach him to grow up such a man as Fritz would have been ! ”

She smiled, saying :

“ You—you were fond of Fritz. I always remember that ! ”

Ostenburg caught his breath painfully.

“ You can lead men, Veronika ! ” he broke out. “ Perhaps—perhaps if you had accepted me that day I asked you to be my wife, I might have been a better man—a great man, in your sense.”

She shook her head.

“ Our salvation is in our own hands. I could not have helped you ; no one could do that, and least of all I, because we did not love each other.”

He looked at her strangely. Yes, for all his admiration he could never have loved her, a very different woman ruled his heart.

“ Egon ’s a lucky man,” he said at last, abruptly. “ You are the finest woman in the whole world — a woman for us to kneel before and worship. You need not mind my saying that to you—I would say it if Egon were here, and it ’s no more than the truth. You have shown me something very beautiful in the last week—something I can never hope to enjoy myself—but still, it does one good to see that there are such things in the world. I thank you for it.”

They had reached the terrace and the nurse came towards them with little Heinz. Veronika ran forward and caught him in her arms. Ostenburg’s eyes were dim as she returned with the child’s head nestling down on her shoulder ; he took her disengaged hand and kissed it very reverently.

“ I ’m a worthless beggar,” he said. “ And I know

that you, whose good opinion I value very much, despise me and think me a coward. Perhaps there is more excuse for me than you believe ! If—if Fate had willed it otherwise we—I—might have been happy as you and Egon are ! ”

The profound sadness of his tone touched her.

“ Heinz,” she said gently, “ it ’s not too late to lead a better life ! Fate, as you say, has denied you happiness, but there is a happiness, too, in duty and in renunciation. Be brave,—be worthy of your name ! ”

He caught his breath with a sob and hurried into the house, crying :

“ It ’s too late ! too late ! ”

Veronika sank down on a seat with the child on her knee, and her eyes were wet.

“ Another man who has thrown honour to the winds for the sake of a woman ! ” she murmured. “ And the pity of it is that they might have been happy—that she is at the bottom a good woman and he a good man—a man of noble impulses. Ah, Heinzchen, Heinzchen, be brave when you are a man ! ”

The child laughed and struggled to reach the ground that he might pluck to pieces a daisy which grew in the grass.

CHAPTER XXV

ANAÏS DISCOVERS A GREY HAIR

GENERAL DUCLOS and his wife were in Cassel on their way to Russia. The command which necessitated the journey by intrusting Duclos with an important mission had come unexpectedly, and they had left Paris at two or three days' notice. Anaïs had written a hasty note to Ostenburg, telling him of the sudden change in her plans and begging him to be in Cassel when they halted there, and now, as she remained alone in her rooms at the "König von Preussen" under plea of fatigue, she was expecting to see him. Her fatigue was no mere pretext, for the day's journey had been a long one, and because physical weariness often touches the mind, especially in very nervous and very highly strung temperaments—because also, perhaps, the scene of her most poignant mental experiences awoke and quickened memory—there had come to her one of those pauses wherein we look backward and review our life. As she paused in this way a sort of fear overcame her. She saw that for three years she had lived for one thing and by one thing only—a man's love. If to Ostenburg she had been the inspiration of all his life, to her he had been life itself. He was a man, and his career, his profession, the world itself, were things of moment; she was a woman, for whom nothing had interest save in so far

as it touched him. Before he came—yes, then she had been interested in public affairs, in literature, in society ; but that was only a makeshift, as she had guessed now and then, when she thought of her girlhood's lover ; then he came, and she began to live for him and for nothing else. To the world she appeared unchanged, but her heart knew the difference, and to-night, as she stood face to face with the magnitude of her love, it appalled her. What would it mean if he ceased to love her ? And he might grow weary, might chafe under the bonds. She was not his wife—ah, if she were ! What if he ceased to love her and kept up the miserable semblance of love because he was true and honourable ? That would be the worst of all ! And yet he was a man, and when she grew old, when she lost her beauty, could she hope to retain her hold on his heart ? She rose with the impulse, went to the mirror in which the pink sunset-clouds were reflected and looked critically at her own image. She was thirty-seven, and she smiled to think what a great age thirty-seven had seemed twenty years ago : one was quite old at thirty-seven—one ought to think of caps, and stockings for the poor, and black dresses. Caps and knitting ! The thought was incongruous with the exquisite figure she saw ! Just then the red light caught a single thread of white in her dark hair and illumined it as if in derision. She sighed, and then laughed almost defiantly.

“ In spite of it I 'm beautiful still,” she whispered, lifting her small hands to her head. “ To-night at the ball they shall not guess that I have white hairs ! And yet—— ”

She paused and looked into the mirror as if it could reveal to her the secrets of the future, then turned

away and went to the window. The sunset glowed in the sky among soft, fleecy clouds, and lent a mystery to the streets and houses below. Would he come, she wondered? Or must she wait to see him at the ball? She had so much to tell him, so much to explain. It was necessary that she should accompany her husband—it could not be avoided without remark—and perhaps it was best! Suppose—she paused, quivering: would it not be best of all, if she said good-bye to him now, for ever, before she lost his love, while still she was in the full glow of her charm and beauty? She would be brave, and it would be better in the end. But even as she made the resolve a well-known tread on the stair set her heart throbbing like a girl's, and a moment later he was beside her, his grave face illumined with happiness, for all that had smitten his conscience at Pustau was forgotten in the joy of meeting.

"I wondered whether you were not coming," she said.

"Could you doubt that? At the ball to-night I cannot ask you the thousand things I want explained—about your sudden departure——"

"Thank you for coming, Heinz. I have just been thinking of you!"

He kissed her hand.

"Thank you for thinking of me! But this horrible journey of yours—I thought we should both be in Paris all the winter!"

She told him the whole affair and he listened sadly, but seeing the necessity for their parting.

"I've been thinking, Heinz," she said at last, in a low voice, "that perhaps it would be better if we said good-bye for ever now."

His eyes lit with fear and wonder.

"Anaïs, what do you mean?" he cried.

She rose and faced him, saying:

"It would be best so!"

"To say good-bye for ever? Not to meet again? Not to write even?"

"That's what I mean."

He paced up and down the room once or twice in silence, then paused close to her.

"Madame, I understand," he said. "It shall be as you wish!"

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed in her turn.

"Surely it's simple enough, Madame. You love me no longer."

"And you think that!" she cried passionately.

"Heinz, Heinz, do you think so meanly of a woman's love as that!"

"What else am I to think? You wish to break off all that has been the light of my life these years! You suggest it calmly——"

"Calmly! When the very thought breaks my heart! Heinz, I thought you understood me better!"

"Then it's not true?" he asked eagerly, catching hold of her hands.

"It's not true that I could ever cease to love you."

"Then why do you hurt me so, dearest?" he cried, still wondering.

"Because—because it's best so."

"How could it be best? What do you mean, Anaïs?"

"I mean that you—that I am growing older, and the day may come when you will no longer love me. I had rather we parted before that!"

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He caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"Anaïs, my love for you is not a thing of youth or of time!" he cried. "In my eyes you will always be beautiful!"

She drew away, saying:

"Hush, Heinz—be careful! I like to hear you say these things, but look! I found a grey hair on my head to-day. Soon I shall be an old woman."

"And if you were, if every hair on your head were white as silver, you would still be the only woman in the world! One white hair! Dearest, I have a thousand! You don't love me less for them."

"But that's different," she murmured.

"I see no difference! Anaïs, don't speak of there being an end to our love! Without your letters how could I fight? How could I do anything? You are my Egeria, my queen!"

Anaïs sighed.

"I cannot resist you; you are my master," she said.

"And—yes, yes, I am sure you will be true to me, I cannot doubt it! But, Heinz, it would have been better if you had not been true to me at all. We live a life of deceit!"

"If Fate sundered us, who shall blame us if we have snatched what happiness we could? We would have led as good a life as Egon and Veronika if our destiny had allowed. It's not our fault!"

"Ah, you've been there!" she cried. "Tell me, what sort of a *châtelaine* does Veronika make?"

"The superbest in the world. Anaïs, what a woman that is!"

"What a woman, indeed! She was worthy to be your wife."

"Worthy to be the wife of a better man than I! Yes, you must be jealous, Anaïs, because I have learned to adore Veronika von Pustau."

She smiled at him in playful reproach, saying :

"That 's true ?"

"As true as that I love *you* !"

"And the child—the little boy ?"

"As sweet a baby as you could wish to see, with a red-gold head and Egon's mouth. He learned to grow very fond of me. Ah, Anaïs, we laugh now, but I have been very sad. It is dreadful to see their happiness, and to know that from us such happiness is cut off for ever."

"We agreed to allow no regrets, Heinz !"

"I forgot. But there it was so hard not to forget ! Now I am with you I will not think any more. Tell me, Anaïs——"

She looked at the clock and interrupted him :

"I can't tell you any more now ! You must go, for it is time to dress. The rest shall be for the ball."

He rose unwillingly.

"You 'll never cease to love me ?" she asked as he kissed her hand.

"Not for all the grey hairs in Christendom !"

She smiled as the door closed on him, smiled and sighed. She had been wrong to doubt him ! And yet, when she looked into the future there seemed to hang a cloud, a presentiment of evil, of retribution—what did it mean ?

A day or two later she set out with her husband for Moscow. There had been a hard moment of parting with Ostenburg, but she had yielded to him in so far that they were to correspond. Her letters were all his life, he told her—why should she rob him of such a

consolation? She had no need to search deeply in her own heart to know what his were to her, and at the last moment she could not deny them to herself, the more because that strange presentiment hung over her still, and she dimly foresaw some agony to come the thought of which caught at her throat like a tangible thing. It was unreasonable, she assured herself, though, as she looked back at his gallant figure mounted on the tall, black horse—for with a party of their Westphalian friends he had ridden out a few miles beyond the town to speed them on their way—she could not altogether chase it from her soul. Some touch of the superstition of “last times” clung to her, and she made the excuse of an unimportant message to a lady in Cassel to stop the chaise, recall the cavalcade, and hear his voice again, just to break the spell.

And yet, she mused, as she leaned back in the cushions, lending an inattentive ear to the General’s exclamations and readings from the *Moniteur* which he perused, if it were the last time it might be best, after all. If she or he died before her return she would not rail against Destiny, for she had been given a love such as few women inspire, and she went followed by the full regrets of that love. Destiny had paid the debt she owed, giving a measure of happiness less indeed than that which she had seemed to promise, but full enough for content.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FORTUNE-TELLER

THE journey was uneventful in so far as great adventures are concerned, but Anaïs's letters to Ostenburg were full of those incidents and details which a traveller of keen intelligence will find in changes of scene, of cultivation, of building, of people. Madame Duclos's pen was quick to note the humours of their sojourn at different hostelries and in different towns, to describe the scenery along their road, the gradual advance of the northern winter. When they reached Moscow her letters were fuller still, and enthusiastic for the town which enchanted her by its quaintness, its unusual character. If Heinz could have shared her impressions she would have been perfectly happy. Moscow, on its part, fell at the feet of the beautiful Frenchwoman and, as the General's mission lengthened out month after month, she drew around her all the people of culture and intelligence in the capital, finding a congenial atmosphere in the brilliance and gaiety of the Russian Court.

Duclos himself was happy and contented. Anaïs sometimes watched him with a sort of wonder and regret, for in these last years she had learned to shrink from him and to despise him, as one despises a person whom one deceives, and now her injustice was impressed upon her. As a friend she could have liked

and trusted him, forgetting the tricks of manner, the lack of polish which so grated upon her nerves, for the sake of virtues that now were faults in her eyes. It was a part of the crookedness of her destiny that he, of all men, should be her husband. He was so proud of her, so tender in his bluff way, so patient towards her whims, her irritability ! That she was indifferent to him he hardly guessed—hardly wished, indeed, that it should be otherwise, for he was not of a romantic disposition, and his heart was far more absorbed by his profession and by the Emperor than by his wife. He was a soldier first of all, and the military side of his nature grew every year more prominent, to the exclusion of the human, which might have been kept alive by a wife who loved him.

The correspondence which Anaïs could not refuse to Ostenburg was as full and frequent as ever. He spent the winter between Paris and his home, chafing at inaction which did not permit him to be near Anaïs, and hoping either for war or her speedy return. She smiled at the impatience of his letters, even while the presentiment of evil which had assailed her at Cassel still overhung her mind. She strove to laugh it away, and would not give it expression when she wrote to Heinz, but it would not be utterly conquered ; and sometimes when she thought to be most free from it it would grip her heart anew as if with an icy hand. An intangible dread is the hardest to vanquish, for reason is powerless against it. A chance strengthened hers.

One day in February, when Madame Duclos was entertaining some friends at dinner, the talk fell upon a certain fortune-teller who had aroused curiosity by the accuracy of her predictions. Countess Borodin, a young and enthusiastic Russian, was full of the mat-

ter, and swore belief ; the gentlemen were sceptical, but the other ladies took sides with credulity and were ready, at a moment's warning, to try the woman's powers. The dispute waxed hot, and at last Anaïs laughingly suggested that they should be put to proof in earnest ; at heart she was serious enough, for the presentiment of misfortune was strong upon her that night, and she wondered whether the soothsayer might not dispel it, or at least give it a form which would be less terrible than this vague fear. At her proposition two or three of the more timid drew back—they feared to deal with what might really be occult powers—but five ladies were ready to attempt the deed, and it was arranged that they should visit the fortune-teller on the morrow.

“ We go alone,” said Countess Borodin, when one of the men complained of his omission from the party. “ A sceptic would obscure the stars. Besides, we keep our own secrets ! ”

“ But how can we then be sure you are not deceiving us ? ”

“ We will swear to add nothing to the woman's words. You will trust our honour ? ”

“ We will not swear to take nothing away,” said Anaïs, laughing.

The fortune-teller lived in a poor part of the town, and the sleighs of finely dressed ladies drew the curious to their doors and windows. The woman herself, however, seemed in no wise disconcerted. She led her clients into a little room of which the atmosphere made them loosen their furs and hold their scented handkerchiefs to their noses while they looked round and marked the usual paraphernalia of dealings with the black art. A few words were exchanged, and,

motioning the ladies to sit down before a low wooden table near the stove, the fortune-teller produced a dirty pack of cards, which she spread out on the table. There was nothing very remarkable about her except a pair of long, narrow eyes which, in the glance she directed towards the five ladies, seemed singularly piercing. Anaïs, at least, felt that some strange intelligence flashed from them to her own, and she shivered involuntarily.

Her turn came last ; the usual predictions had been showered on the others—things general and generally possible, with a few random shots that hit the mark and sent a ripple of laughter over the eager fortune-seekers—but when the woman dealt the cards for Anaïs her face changed, and she leaned across the table with such a strange, intent look that Madame Duclos gave a little cry. So she remained for a moment, then let her eyes sink again to the cards and drew her hand slowly over her brow.

“ If the lady wishes to hear, I must be alone with her,” she said in a low voice, different in some way from that which she had used before.

There were many protests from the rest, but the woman was obdurate, though she would give no reason for her wish. The mystery excited Anaïs ; she was half afraid and yet determined to hear what would be foretold her. As solitude was the condition demanded she begged the others to yield, so, with much laughter and insistence that they should know everything later, they left the room and waited outside in the sleighs.

“ Now I can see,” said the fortune-teller. “ It happens so, sometimes, with some people. The others—I could read nothing ; I had to guess, to imagine—but you ! ”

She stopped and passed her hand again over her eyes, then looked at the cards, more as if by habit than because she found her inspiration in them. Anaïs watched her breathlessly. What was she going to say? Was it foolish to be so credulous?"

She spoke at last in the same strange, low voice :

"I see a man, a tall man, with dark grey hair at the temples, and dark grey eyes that shine. He wears a soldier's dress—not the dress of our regiments here, but I think it must be a soldier's—and on his breast there's a little cross tied with a bit of ribbon. He is writing a letter—the letter is to you!"

Anaïs clasped her hands nervously.

"Yes, yes,—go on!" she cried, for the woman had paused.

"He is writing in a room with a window that overlooks a river and a bridge. There is sunshine outside, and I see two towers above the roofs of a city. There are low blue hills beyond, and it does not seem to be winter, for there is no snow. He writes for a long time. Now I see him again. There is a battle—blood and death on every side—but he is unharmed. Now I see fire and smoke. It passes, and I see you with the tall man; you are both sad, and you seem to say good-bye. Then I see you with another man, not so tall as the other and older. There is snow, snow all around! A great misfortune threatens you—there is a heavy cloud—I cannot see clearly, but there is snow and ice, and bitter cold!"

Anaïs shuddered; the thing seemed real.

"And the tall man—what of him?" she cried.

"He comes again, in the snow, and stands with the other man. They have drawn their swords—they are fighting by a little mound in the snow, and the mound

seems to be a grave. I see the red sun leap up, but there is something redder than sunlight on the snow. I see——”

She broke off abruptly and covered her face with her hands, murmuring :

“ I see nothing more. There is a shadow and a heavy cloud ! ”

“ Can you tell me no more ? ” whispered Anaïs. Her face was white and set ; her hands trembled.

The woman sighed and gathered the cards together.

“ No more,” she said in her natural voice.

Anaïs stood up and groped with her hands as one in the dark. She was under the spell of the woman’s utterance, unable to doubt.

“ Tell me one thing ! ” she besought with terror in her voice. “ The tall man—I shall see him again ? ”

“ I saw you together, lady. Once again you will see him ! ”

Anaïs breathed a deep sigh. The shadows that her heart foretold had been given shape : some awful destiny overhung her and Heinz ; but at least they would meet again, once again. In the light of that promise the rest seemed less cruel—and if the grave in the snow were her own, what did it matter ? She flung three or four gold pieces from her purse on the table, then left the room in silence. The woman gathered up the coins with those that the other ladies had given her and put the cards methodically away. Her face had resumed its normal expression ; the trance or vision, whatever it was, had left her—she was again merely the professional fortune-teller, half-charlatan, half-reader of faces.

Anaïs was greeted with questions and wonderings. She tucked herself into the sleigh beside the Countess Borodin and forced a laugh in reply.

“ No mystery,” she said. “ Merely the same kind of things that she predicted for you ! ”

The truth was at once too horrible and too sacred to meet their ears ; she must face the burden alone—alone, save for Ostenburg’s love,—strengthened only by the knowledge that whatever befell she should yet meet him once again.

When she reached home a letter in his writing lay on the table ; she tore it open eagerly and read the contents with a growing wonder.

“ Dearest,” he began, “ I write with the towers of Florence at my window and the blue Apennines beyond, and the Arno rolling through its bridges below. I hear the bell of the *campanile*, for it is just noon, I see the cypresses of Fiesole springing up to meet a cloudless sky. Why are you not here to share the beauty with me ? I have been sent unexpectedly with despatches and have to return only too soon—it would not be too soon if you were in Paris ! ”

She laid down the letter, musing ; his presence in Italy had been unknown to her, and the woman had said that he wrote from a room whence one saw a city, and towers, and mountains. In this she had spoken the truth, and the truth in this lesser thing promised truth in the greater. Would it indeed be so ? Would Heinz and the General stand sword in hand by a grave in the snow—her grave ? Was death so near ? She bowed her head, pressed the letter to her lips, and read the rest slowly and tenderly, as one who knows the worst that may happen and is prepared to meet it.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST MEETING

THE winter passed, and with the spring came uneasiness and the rumours of war confirmed. General Duclos made a flying journey into France with despatches, taking his wife as far as Warsaw and leaving her there on account of the enforced swiftness of his travel. His return was delayed, until, when he again crossed the Niemen, it was with the invading army of France. At the Niemen, Anaïs joined the army; she could not be with her husband whose post was in the vanguard, and so was compelled to travel in the rear with other ladies of her acquaintance, trembling under the cloud which war seemed to bring more near. She was not afraid for herself, but she feared for Ostenburg, even while she clung despairingly to the promise that they should meet again. She had little hope of lasting success to the French arms; the General, indeed, wrote cheerfully of a victorious entry into Moscow, and confidence was everywhere high, but Ostenburg's letters were less reassuring and tallied better with her own apprehension of that terrible ally of Russia—the winter. Ostenburg's regiment, in the corps of Murat, bore the brunt of many skirmishes and endured some hard fighting, their commander, as usual, distinguishing himself by reckless bravery and fine leadership.

News came thick and fast through the summer—the

battle of Borodino, the victorious advance of the French, the taking of Smolensk — and Anais rejoiced. At last Napoleon's vanguard saw on the horizon the cupolas of the Kremlin, and within a few hours the army was encamped before Moscow.

That evening General Duclos sought out his wife, and established her in an abandoned palace on the outskirts of the city. She questioned him eagerly, and learned the cost at which the Emperor had reached his goal — though Duclos was still confident of success, blind to the possibility of disaster. He departed to his post, giving Anais every assurance he could imagine — the assurance, too, that Ostenburg was unwounded — and promising to visit her every day that the troops were at Moscow.

She awaited another visitor, but the next day brought her a note from Heinz, telling her that his ill-luck in being stationed at some distance from the town made it impossible for him to leave his post even for an hour, and beseeching her to let him have word of her safety and well-being. To know him near and unwounded was enough ; she waited patiently for the moment when she should look on his face again, not too eager for it, so certain was she that it would be the last time. Days of suspense and incertitude followed ; the horrors of conflagration came upon the city, and still Napoleon lingered before it. At last, after a month, the order for retreat was given. It was during the movements which preceded departure that Ostenburg snatched a few hours' leave to ride into Moscow. He found Anais in her apartment, which, standing near the edge of the town, had been spared by the flames, and for a few moments, — very few, it seemed to them, — they were together. He was full of hope, rejoicing in her presence

too deeply to fear the future, and eager in inquiring the plans for her comfort. She was broken down by the certainty of misfortune and clung to him despairingly.

"I know this is the last time!" she whispered, as he held her hands to his lips.

"Why—why do you say such things?" he asked her with tender reproach.

She told him, brokenly, something of what the fortune-teller had said—something of her own fears and presentiments, and he soothed her with gentle incredulity as one might a frightened child; but she would not be comforted.

"I know there is evil before us," she said, crushing a handkerchief between her slender fingers to keep down the tears which her voice betrayed.

"Dearest, be reasonable," he said. "We shall meet on the journey, I hope, and many times after that!"

She looked up into his eyes, murmuring:

"Say that again! Make me believe it! Ah, if I could! It is some power stronger than my will which makes me think of misfortune."

At last he had to go, unwilling, as always, to leave her, and shaken by the certitude of her fears.

"Say again that you love me," she besought him. "Say that you will love me for ever—whatever happens!"

To soothe her, and to humour her whim, he repeated the words fervently and from his heart: they could never be said so often as to impair their truth, he told her.

"And I love you," she whispered. "I shall never cease to love you. But it's good-bye now—good-bye for ever! I trust you through all, Heinz!"

He kissed her, and then, because the parting needs

must come, tore himself away and left her standing by the window. At the door he looked back and met her eyes fixed on him with the gaze of one who looks for the last time. He came back and fell at her feet, caught at her hand, crying :

“Dearest, it can’t be for ever ! We shall meet again !”

She bent her mournful eyes on his face, forcing a tremulous smile for his sake though her heart wept. He kissed her once more and went quickly, not daring to look back. When he was in the street he waved his hand, seeing that her pale face gazed out on him still ; she threw open the window, regardless who might be there, and flung down the little handkerchief she had crushed between her fingers ; he caught it and pressed it to his lips. So he rode away, but she sat there still, mute and dry-eyed. She could not cheat herself ; it was the last time, and her life was ended.

On the next day the retreat began. That which can now be so coldly described, so clearly defined, was a nightmare of horror to those who took part in it—a period when time seemed lost in an eternity of pain, when the only thought was to press onward to a goal that grew hourly more remote as misery heightened to the pitch of endurance. The horror was increased, too, by its unexpectedness, for no one had foreseen such a disaster, and the severities of winter began much earlier than usual. Ostenburg was in despair. While discipline remained, his regiment kept far to the right, never joining the centre where Anaïs travelled in a chaise near her husband ; but when cold, hunger, and sickness had changed the retreat to rout, he sought wildly and impotently, questioning each body of stragglers that crossed his path, and straining his eyes

to the horizon. If he could only find her — give his life for her's! His horse died, and he had to travel on foot, cursing the slowness of his advance, though indeed greater speed could have availed him little when he knew not in what direction to set his course. The impossibility of even knowing her fate stung him with a more intense agony, and when he suffered it was with the added torture of realising what this pain, this privation, must mean for a luxuriously nurtured woman. He railed against the chance which kept him from her side, though he knew that there he could only have witnessed misery which he could not have relieved, destitute as he was of every necessary. The horrible sights, too, which met his eyes—the cruelty, the brutality of such a time—made him sick with the knowledge that Anaïs could not be shielded from it; that was the worst of all. In his despair he did not take into account the acts of chivalry which sometimes spring up in the least-expected soil, like flowers in a prison—the rough soldiers giving up the best parts of any food that might come in their way to the lady who thanked them so gently, or making room for her near their scanty fire, or mending a ruined hut to shelter her from the cold northern blasts.

He went on with two or three brother officers and a remnant of his men who clung together for mutual defence and support. One and another failed day by day, one and another fell among the dead that strewed the army's passage, and the rest pressed onward, hope dying in their hearts. A day or two after they had crossed the Beresina one of the officers succumbed, a lad of little more than twenty. In the bitterness of the afternoon they paused and watched by him, seeing that he could be borne no further, and one of the

soldiers with rough affection gave his cloak to make a bed, while another forwent his little store of brandy. The boy raved in his delirium, and would not be soothed unless Ostenburg knelt by him and held his hand, for he worshipped his Colonel only second to the Emperor : Heinz did what he could, but his face was impassive and his eyes dry : he had no heart save for one thing now—this could not move him, though he wondered at himself that it should be so.

" Would you do as much for a woman ? " he asked suddenly of the man who gave the cloak.

" God forbid that a woman should be here ! " cried he. " If she were, Colonel, I am a Frenchman ! "

Heinz bent his head in intolerable agony. She was in the midst of scenes such as this ! Perhaps even she lay dying like this lad, and he was not there to help her or to say farewell !

The young officer's life hovered for a few moments longer on his lips ; then he looked up with a radiant smile, whispering :

" Thank you, Monsieur ; I die for the Emperor ! "

Ostenburg withdrew his hand and rose.

" He's dead," he said slowly—indifferently it seemed to the others ; he himself was angry that he should feel no more, but the little handkerchief that had been crushed in Anaïs's hand lay next his heart.

" These Germans are like stone," whispered one of the officers to the other ; " they have no feeling."

They marched on, for there was no shelter and the cold was intense. Ostenburg walked silent, with bowed head, as was his custom. Suddenly he caught at the arm of an officer beside him.

" Could a woman live through this ? " he asked in a low, agonised voice. " Could she bear it ? "

"What do you mean?" said the other, thinking he had gone mad.

"Why don't you speak? Could—could she live?"

"If there are such, perhaps death would be a mercy. Surely that mercy must have been granted them!"

Ostenburg groaned, and the other man saw that in his hand was pressed the rag of a white handkerchief. A third caught sight of it as he came up beside them.

"What! a lady's favour here?" he cried with a laugh. "What vanity to hold by it!"

Heinz turned on him with eyes that sent the man staggering backward, and spoke slowly, in tones that fell clear and cold as icicles.

"Spare your jests for a better theme," he said.

"Surely the last gifts of the dead are sacred!"

"Have you no pity?" whispered the other man, catching at his comrade's wrist. "She's with the army."

They fell back and left Ostenburg alone with his grief.

Next day they came upon a group of stragglers. Ostenburg stopped to question them.

"General Duclos?" said one. "I saw him pass the Beresina. His wife is with him."

"She lives?" Heinz breathed between clenched teeth.

"Poor thing! She lived then—but her strength was failing; she could barely speak or move. It's awful for a woman!"

"Where did they go?"

To that question there could be no answer, but Heinz pressed onward with the swiftness born of a blind hope, leaving his comrades behind. Might he perhaps see her once again? Or would her presentiment be true?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MOUND IN THE SNOW

A GROUP of soldiers were huddled round a feeble fire heaped up in the midst of the snow. The exquisite sky of a frosty night domed above them, pitilessly beautiful and cold ; the starlight shining on the endless expanse of snow revealed the poor roofs of a little village to the right and, nearer to the fire, a tumble down hut, half shattered by storm or war. One or two dark patches showed against the white—men who had fallen by the way—and the larger mass of a dead horse lay beside its master. One could not imagine a more desolate scene.

The men at the fire each tried to overcome his suffering after his own fashion—one young fellow even dared to raise his voice in song, but another laid finger on lip and pointed to the hut ; two were cooking broth over the fire in an old tin pan, a third slept in his ragged mantle, and the rest were talking in low voices that yet rang strangely over the snow. These last were officers, though the torn uniforms and unshaven faces hid all differences of rank, and a common endurance of suffering had made equality the law.

“ It ’s bad enough for a man,” said one of them, “ but a woman ! She can’t live long, and perhaps that ’s the best we can wish her ! Poor Madame Duclos ! When I remember her in Cassel ! ”

"And in Paris! We were all in love with her."

"Ostenburg was mad over her—poor fellow!"

"Ah, and she?"

"Hush—she's dying!"

"*Mon Capitaine*, do you think that a drop of brandy might revive Madame?" asked one of the men, raising a haggard face from his arm.

"Perhaps it might. Here's the General—ask him!"

Duclos, wrapped in his cloak, came up to the fire. He shook his head in answer to the officer's inquiry and gave a sob.

"I could endure it!" he groaned. "But for her—for her! If I had left her at home!"

The man who had spoken before rose and held out a little flask.

"Take this, *mon Général*," he said. "There's only a little, but it may do good to Madame."

Duclos stretched out his hand greedily, then hesitated.

"Thank you," he said slowly. "I will not rob you."

"Nonsense!—I'm a strong man. Take it, General! We all would give more than this for the poor lady if we could!" He thrust the flask into Duclos's hand.

Duclos turned and made his way back to the hut. A little fire of sticks flickered on the hearth, and close to it, wrapped in a military cloak, lay Anaïs, her head supported on a knapsack. The faint light showed her beautiful face haggard, her hair neglected. The General poured out some of the brandy and held it to her lips; she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"You are very good to me, *mon ami*," she whispered.

He stroked her head and rearranged the cloak with rough tenderness; while he did so a fit of coughing

choked her, and left her gasping and trembling ; his eyes grew wet, for her pain was worse to bear than his own, and he could not relieve it. When she was quieter he sat down on the opposite side of the fire and buried his face in his hands, hoping that she might sleep. But sleep would not come to Anaïs, and she lay there, facing the agony of remorse, and living through every scene of her past life with a vividness that was torture. The hour of trial had shown her the fine metal which underlay her husband's small vanities and lack of culture, and in those terrible days of suffering and want, by the brave endurance of which she had striven to expiate the years of unsanctioned love, she had learned to know remorse, and to understand that by her own fault she had turned to poison the love which might have been a pure memory. She knew now that the end was very near—the little grave in the snow—and she was glad. She would not shrink from death, would not even fear it, save for one thing : the wrong that she had done the good man whose name she bore, the irreparable injustice. And he believed her true ; his one thought was to save her ! She—she must save him from the knowledge of the truth. In the bosom of her dress was a packet of letters—those which Ostenburg had written to Moscow. She should have destroyed them, but with the folly of love she had not been able to bring herself to tear or burn the beloved writing. Before she died they must be got rid of in some way. Her hand tightened over them and she shuddered. If she could have seen him once more—only once more ! It was her punishment to die like this, without the presence of him whom she loved so faithfully. She wondered whether he were dead—half hoping it were so, half wishing him to live on and

retrieve, by many honourable years, the past of which she now saw the fault so clearly. Then, with the inconsequence of fever, her mood changed, and she swore that the price she paid was not too high for their happiness ; but the naked truth rose up before her again, and she wept scalding tears of grief and sorrow. Her thought flew to Veronika, happy and honoured in a husband's love ; she would have been as good a woman if her destiny had been ordered so, but it had been too strong for her,—Ostenburg's love had been too strong,—she was weak and irresolute. But the letters—the letters—she must think of them. Her eyes fell on the fire and on the still figure beyond. She listened ; he had fallen asleep ; his breath came regularly and slowly. She drew the letters from her dress and with a great effort sat up—she had hardly known before how weak she was. It was horribly still, and she shuddered with fear, for the darkness seemed all at once peopled with strange forms. She raised the packet to her lips, as if their touch would protect her. “ Good-bye, Heinz ! ” she murmured ; “ good-bye ! ” Then, struggling to her knees, she thrust the papers into the flame.

Her movement roused Duclos. He sprang up and caught her swaying form in his arms. For an instant she clung to him convulsively with an inarticulate cry, then fell back—dead.

He felt her heart, her pulse, and with a groan laid her back on the cloak, closing her eyes. The end had come—perhaps it was best for her. Then his glance fell on the fire, and he saw the charred papers in the midst. What was she doing with them ? What was the cry on her lips as he caught her ? What was the fear in her eyes, and the instinctive movement to keep him from the hearth ?

He snatched forward and drew the packet from the fire. The string which held it had burst, and the writing on one of the covers was disclosed to his view : he knew it well — too well — even though the words were charred and half effaced. Feverishly he tore open the first letter, and by the flickering light read it very slowly, once, twice, hardly as yet comprehending its meaning. Then at last he understood : it was a love-letter to his wife, signed with the one word, "Heinz!" He broke into no protestations, no curses, but stood there a broken man. The woman he trusted had trampled his honour in the dust ; the man he accounted his friend had repaid his friendship with the basest disloyalty. And he had been blind, blind, when doubtless the world held its finger at him in scorn, in derision, for the world always knew of these things. After his fashion he had loved Anais : he had been so proud of her, so indulgent towards her : he had been a fool to trust any woman, most of all a noblewoman, bred in the coquetry and the vice of Versailles. He lit a candle which he carried in his pocket, set it in a block of wood, and, as if to torture himself, read each letter deliberately. The man who was usually so quick to speak, so quick to anger, grew still and silent before this awful thing. He was stunned ; every gentle feeling was turned to gall at the deceit of which he had been the dupe. Those letters, so passionately written, so passionately read, seemed, as it were, to shrivel to nothing before the dull, cold glance of his eyes ; their beauty was gone, their tenderness was a mockery ; they were symbols merely of dishonour, of falsehood. The candle burned low, almost to the wood in which he had set it, before he had finished those closely written pages. When he had done he folded

the last letter and hid the whole packet in his coat ; then he took up the candle, and, crossing the hut, uncovered the dead woman's face. He looked into it long and intently, curiously almost, as if wondering what those features had hidden from him, or how they had looked in Ostenburg's eyes. He did not pity her now, nor was he angry with her, though a dull pain gnawed at his heart ; his anger was for the man, and for the man his revenge—a higher Power had punished the woman. He replaced the cloak on her face and blew out the candle ; through the broken roof the stars paled to dawn. He took out the flask of brandy and drank some of it : he must live to find Ostenburg. Cold and hunger could not touch him now, still he must be careful lest revenge should escape him. His life was valuable until they met.

He strode out from the hut and joined the little circle round the fire. A man woke and questioned him, saying —

“ How is Madame ? ”

He started at the question, then drew himself together and sat down.

“ Dead,” he answered briefly.

The men nudged each other and looked at him. Was the loss going to turn his brain ? He did not heed them, nor even seem aware of their presence, for he drew a bundle of letters from his coat and turned them over and over in the firelight. Accustomed to see pain endured in many ways, they respected his silence for a long time. Then the officers spoke together, and one of them approached Duclos.

“ Do you wish—shall we bury her in the snow ? ” he asked gently. “ It might be best so, for we must go on to-day.”

Duclos started and looked up with blank eyes.

"A grave?" he said slowly. "For her? If you wish. Do as you like." And he returned to the perusal of the letters.

The man who had spoken to him shivered at his strange tone; there was something unearthly in it. He went back to the others; presently two or three of the common soldiers broke the frozen snow with their bayonets, and very reverently laid Anaïs in the grave thus fashioned, piling above it a mound conspicuous on the smooth surface of the plain. The General made no sign of approval or disapproval; he sat by the fire still, motionless; from time to time he put his hand to his breast, laughed a mirthless laugh to hear the papers crackle, and stealthily drew them out. He was on the verge of madness.

Presently, when the work of burial was done, a man came out of the grey dawn and hastily approached the little group. He was tall and wrapped in a tattered cloak.

"Have you seen—do you know General Duclos?" he asked in a low, worn voice, as soon as he was near enough to be heard.

Strange meetings were too frequent to arouse curiosity. The man addressed simply pointed to the fire and said:

"There he is!"

The other hastened forward and laid a hand on Duclos's shoulder, crying:

"Thank God, I've found you at last!"

The General looked round with those strange, dull eyes.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he muttered savagely.

"Don't you know me? Ostenburg!"

He started to his feet and caught Heinz by the arm in a grip of iron, echoing:

"Ostenburg! By God, then there's justice in heaven!"

"What do you mean? You're safe so far, General? And how—how—" His voice shook and he lost his self-control—"Madame Duclos?"

The General met his eager gaze with a slow, bitter glance, and pointed in silence to the mound in the snow. Heinz reeled, clutching at the General's hand to steady himself. The realisation of even a long-expected grief strikes one like a blow.

"Dead!" he gasped.

Duclos watched him keenly.

"Yes, Monsieur—dead. I am glad she is dead!"

Ostenburg recollected himself, and stood upright.

"Because of the suffering?" he asked in a low voice. "Is that what you mean, General?"

Duclos drew out the bundle of letters very slowly, with his eyes fixed on Ostenburg's face. They were alone—alone in that vast solitude, for the other men, understanding that something unusual was being enacted between the two, stood aside, a little way behind the mound in the snow.

"I mean this," said Duclos, thrusting the letters into the Freiherr's hand. "Perhaps, Monsieur, you know the writing."

Heinz started and fingered the paper mechanically. Nothing could hurt him now that Anaïs was dead; that had dulled his senses.

"Then she told you before—?" he broke off with a sob.

"She told me nothing. I found these which she had

tried to burn. I was to be deceived to the end, but Fate would not cheat me of my revenge. *Monsieur*, there is only one explanation possible—" He drew his sword.

Heinz bowed his head, saying :

" *Monsieur*, I am at your service. I ask no mercy for myself ; call me what you will,—coward, traitor, liar,—but be gentle to her memory ! I was to blame : when I knew that I loved her, that *Madame Duclos* was the girl to whom I had been betrothed, I ought to have gone away from Cassel, never have seen her again. She was a woman, and I did not respect her weakness."

" Hush, *Monsieur*, what good to speak ? When I married a Court lady I should have been prepared for—this ! But I am a *bourgeois* and I believe in *bourgeois* virtues. The woman who soils my name can have no forgiveness, the man can receive but one answer. *Monsieur*, unless you are a coward as well as a traitor, draw your sword !"

Ostenburg flung off his cloak, saying quietly :

" You have the right to command, General !"

The officers, seeing their intention, rushed forward.

" Gentlemen, what does this mean ?" one of them asked.

Duclos lowered his point.

" An affair of honour," he said—" a quarrel of long standing between *Monsieur von Ostenburg* and myself."

" A quarrel at cards," said Heinz in a loud voice. " General, I am ready !"

The others fell back. The name of Ostenburg had broken upon them like a thunderbolt—it was horrible to see these men fighting in the grey dawn near that

new-made grave ! One of them pointed to the mound and the other bent his head in assent.

Heinz had no wish for life ; he had lived for Anaïs, and her loss left the world a blank. He fought carelessly at first, then, expert swordsman as he was, warmed to the work and watched his adversary's point with fascination. He was as cool as if they were using foils, and this coolness, born of utter contempt of life, gave him the advantage. Duclos had fire in his veins ; hatred and bitterness shook his arm, and he fought so wildly as to exhaust himself. It was very still, save for the clash of steel, as Duclos thrust and attacked Ostenburg's impenetrable guard. The snow crackled beneath their feet, the glory of sunrise showed above the horizon, and the fire burned low. The cold was intense, but neither felt it, though the spectators drew their tattered cloaks more closely round them and shivered. Far away a dull thud of hoofs on the plain was audible in the clear, frosty air.

The strange duel still continued ; presently Duclos closed wildly with his adversary, there was a moment's struggle, then he fell back with a great gash across his face and a stream redder than the red sun which leaped above the horizon staining the snow. Heinz, looking horror-stricken into the glazed eyes which seemed to stare up at him, dropped his sword and flung himself on the little mound in the snow. There was a cry around him,—“ Cossacks ! ” A hand raised him and dragged him along ; he was too broken to resist. As in a dream he heard a voice say : “ It 's over—he 's dead ! We must leave him.” He groaned and hastened forward as if the Furies were at his heels, never looking back to see the line of horsemen who scoured the plain behind.

CHAPTER XXIX

OSTENBURG'S HOME-COMING

FRAU VON OSTENBURG remained steadfast through all the months of suspense, through the rumours, the certainty of disaster, clinging with all the strength of her nature to the belief that Heinz would return. No eye had seen her shed a tear, but as the winter passed she looked many years older, for the anxiety to which she would not yield traced lines on her cheek and bowed her vigorous frame. In January Egon von Pustau had gone to Berlin to work in the cause of freedom, the hope of which sprang high after the French misfortunes and the Freifrau asked Veronika and the child to relieve her solitude by a long, indefinite visit. The younger woman's quick eyes read the pain of the elder—read it in her tender indulgence towards Ostenburg's little namesake, in the tension of her face if the sound of hoofs rung in the avenue, her sharply drawn breath when a letter came. She knew the Freifrau too well to give open sympathy, but in a thousand ways she strove to lighten the heavy burden that lay on her shoulders. They talked sometimes of Heinz, gravely and without a tear.

“He will come back—he must come back!” the old lady said, folding her white hands in her lap. “I hope still. But even if he should never return, I must not grieve too much. He has died a soldier's death—has died in the discharge of his duty.”

That was all she would say, but her tenacity in clinging to hope showed Veronika what the loss would mean to her if that hope proved vain.

The scattered remnants of the army began to return, and Westphalians were welcomed to their homes. Veit, who had been prevented by illness from following his master, rode to and from Cassel, gathering news and seeking for information, but he heard nothing of the Freiherr. He poured out his distress to Veronika when he found her alone.

"If the Herr Freiherr were to be lost, why was I not there to die with him?" he cried. "We were boys together, *gnädige Frau*, and I love him. Yes, if it be not presumptuous to say so, he is as dear to me as a brother. If he does not come back, my mistress will die, and the estates go from the family! Freiherr Ludwig is not one of us!"

From Veit, Veronika learned that Madame Duclos had left Moscow with her husband; she was pierced with sorrow and pity for her friend, scarcely hoping that she might escape. Moreover she feared lest Heinz, not caring to survive her, might voluntarily have sought death even if Fate had spared him. It was an awful end, an awful punishment! She wept in secret over the pity of it.

On an evening in January the two women were sitting together in Frau von Ostenburg's parlour, working and talking over the budget of news which Veit had brought from Cassel. Little Heinz was playing contentedly on the floor with Ostenburg's wolfhound, pulling its ears and stroking its shaggy sides with no trace of fear. Suddenly the dog lifted its head and barked loudly, so that the child, startled, began to cry. There was a clatter of hoofs in the distance, sounding

clear though faint through the frosty air. It came nearer, ringing sharply, as though the rider urged his horse to full speed. At last it stopped before the house, and the great knocker clanged an importunate summons on the door. The Freifrau rose with a low cry, saying :

“ It is my son ! ”

Before she could reach the hall a man sprang through the bustle of servants, the flashing of torches, and caught at her hand. Shaken by the fulfilment of her hope, she gave a sob and let him embrace her before the whole household. Her son was come to her again ! But when, still in silence—for what need was there of words?—she led him into the parlour, which Veronika had left that she might not intrude upon the sacredness of that meeting, a pang went through her heart. He was changed—changed as she would not have thought a few months would change a man : his hair was white, his eyes, glowing strangely and feverishly, were hollow as a ghost’s, his frame so emaciated that the ragged uniform hung loosely upon it.

“ I knew you would come,” she said at last. “ I knew you were not lost. But you have suffered, Heinz ! ”

He covered his face and groaned : the suffering was more than she could ever dream.

“ Mother, don’t speak of it,” he said. “ Let me forget—for to-night at least ! We are together ; I ask no more. I have come to you for peace.”

She bent over him and kissed his brow. Her pride, her joy, hurt him, even though he had longed for it. Yes, he had come for peace, fleeing across Germany like a hunted thing,—come to see her once again, and then,—life held nothing more for him ; his own hand

might end it, might avenge that still figure lying beneath the red sun with the red mark on its face, might silence that groan that rang in his ears for ever and drove him to despair—might expiate, too, the boy's death which had burdened him so heavily. What need to live when sorrow and remorse tore his soul?

But now he must control himself, must stifle the past if only that he might hear his mother's voice again in tenderness, in calm. To-night he would thrust away all that stood between them.

"My son, your clothes are ragged," she said. "Veit must provide you with what is necessary. This torn cloak is not enough to keep you warm!"

He fingered it mechanically, saying:

"I never thought to get another. I wanted to go straight on—to you!"

When he came to dinner in fresh clothes, with hair combed and cut by Veit, the Freifrau looked at him with approval—thus, he seemed more the Heinz of old days—and when he bent to kiss Veronika's hand, greeting her with a momentary flash of his former gaiety, she was cheated into the belief that there was no change but what time would efface. He succeeded in his part well enough, though his mother's eyes smote him with a pang now and then, and Frau von Pustau's keen glance made him tremble. She saw the change the Freifrau had seen, and saw deeper, knowing what she did of Anaïs; his face was that of a man who had been in hell and could not forget.

They spoke little of what he had endured, for the two women understood that he shrank from recalling it and preferred to hear of those who had been left behind. He asked news of Egon, of the estate, and the tenants. Almost he persuaded himself that what had

passed was a dream — and then suddenly came the vision of that mound in the snow, the still form, the red sun, the cossacks on the horizon, and he glanced round fearfully.

“How is Heinzchen?” he said at last.

“Well, and much grown. He is here with me,” replied Veronika.

“Will he remember me?”

“Without doubt! He speaks of you often.”

“I should like to see him,” said the Freiherr, drawing a quick breath.

“You shall to-morrow. He is in bed.”

A sudden shade of pain crossed Ostenburg’s face.

“Is he asleep?” he asked. “May I not see him now? I want to see him before to-morrow. I will not wake him! Let me go, Gräfin!”

The Freifrau smiled, saying:

“He looks pretty asleep!”

Heinz rose.

“May n’t I see him?” he asked again, with a sort of eagerness in his voice.

Rather surprised at his insistence, Veronika yielded to it, and led him upstairs to the child’s room. Heinzchen slept peacefully, with a chubby hand beneath his cheek and some well-worn toy from which he would not be separated by his side. Veronika bent over and kissed his head lightly, shielding the light from his face the while. When she rose there was the shade of an unutterable sadness on Ostenburg’s face and his eyes were veiled with tears. He stood so for an instant looking down at the bed, and his lips seemed to move; then he, too, bent and kissed the boy’s cheek. They left the room in silence.

“Thank you!” he said at last, as they went down

the stairs. "I wanted to see him like that. If wishes could shield him from the burden of sorrow, he has many — surely he will be free from the burden of sin ! Let him keep some love for me !"

"What do you mean ?" she cried, with a sudden fear. But he made no answer and they stood already by the parlour door. She paused, saying : "Can I not help you ? You are in trouble—more than the memory of your suffering. Can I not help you ?"

"There's no help—but one," he murmured. "Veronika, be merciful in your thoughts of me !"

She could say no more, for he had already opened the door that she might pass through.

"Heinzchen was asleep ?" asked the Freifrau.

"Soundly," said Heinz, as he set a chair before the fire for Veronika.

It was later than her usual hour when Frau von Ostenburg rose to retire. She took her son's hands and looked into his face, saying :

"You need rest, Heinz. We will talk more to-morrow. Sleep well, my son."

He bent and pressed both her hands to his lips with a long kiss.

"I think I shall sleep very well, Mother," he said ; "more soundly than Heinzchen even. Good-night !"

He felt that Veronika's eyes dwelt searchingly on his as he took her hand.

"Remember how pleased Heinzchen will be to see you to-morrow," she said, with a strange, urgent tone in her voice. "I shall tell him the very first thing that you went to look at him asleep."

At last he was alone—alone and free. He hastened to his study on the other side of the hall, and raised the curtain for a moment to look out at the still, frosty

night and the old avenue stretching far into darkness and gloom. Then he sat down and wrote for a while intently ; when he had done, a letter to his mother lay uppermost on the table, where it must be seen at once. The house was terribly quiet, for he was the last person moving, and soon, very soon— He stopped in his thought with a sharp, mirthless laugh. A pistol lay on the table—he had taken it from his pocket when he entered the room ; he looked to the priming of it, and ran his long fingers meditatively down the barrel. Strange that death should lie in such a little thing ! After the agony of the last weeks he was curiously calm now that the final moment was come. In an instant all would be over—sorrow, remorse, pain—and General Duclos would be avenged. He raised the pistol. The image of Anaïs, radiant and beautiful, was before his eyes—her name on his lips. His finger was on the trigger, but he did not pull it, for a woman's hand caught his arm and he turned to face Veronika von Pustau. Her grey eyes were alight with a great pity, a great reproach, and Heinz noted idly, as one notes trivial things at a supreme moment, how the rays of the candle she carried fell on her hair making it glow like copper.

“ From what have I saved you, Freiherr ! ” she cried.

“ From ending a useless life. You have no reason to prevent me—no right ! ”

He spoke impatiently, angered that she should come between him and his purpose.

“ Only the right of one human soul to help another. I guessed truly, then ! That was what you meant ! I sat up for a long while in my room, writing to Egon, but I could not banish the look in your face, the sound

of your voice as you said : ' I shall sleep soundly, Mother.' I was afraid. At last I could bear it no longer and I came. ' Thank God I came ! '

" But how did you know ? "

" Could I not see the suffering in your face ? Could I not see that you were changed ? Did you not say that there was only one help for you ? "

" But why did you come ? What was my life to you ? "

" I came because I am your friend—because I love your mother." She set the candle down on the table and came nearer, holding out her hands. " Won't you tell me what drove you to this act of desperation—of cowardice ? Can a friend not help you ? Was it the loss of some one you loved ? Heinz, you may speak freely. I know—I know it all."

The pistol dropped from his hand, and he stood there with heaving breast.

" She 's dead," he said at last, in a low voice. " Out there in the snow. Oh, it was cruel—cruel ! "

" And because you have lost her you wished to take your life ? Was that brave ? "

" But you don't know all," he broke out, feeling that to this woman he must justify himself, for her strong, pitiful nature had made his misery bow to it.

" God help you—I know enough ! But it 's not for me to blame, only to pity now ! "

He caught her hands and his eyes grew wet.

" Veronika, you are the truest friend man ever had ! " he cried. " Still, there 's something more for you to hear." And with broken phrases he told her of all the rest—of the duel and Duclos's death.

" Why should I live ? " he ended. " What 's

my life worth without her? I have spoiled my life, wasted it—what is there left? I am afraid to live!”

“Is it Heinz von Ostenburg who speaks of fear? Is it Heinz von Ostenburg who proves himself a coward in the time of trial? Yes, it’s cowardly to run away from punishment—cowardly to leave our post before our duty is done!”

“I am not brave,” he said. “To face the enemy—that’s nothing! To face memory,—to hear that groan for ever,—that’s too much for me to bear. Besides, why should I live? Have I not done enough wrong? Veronika, it is I who have cast a shadow on your life—the shadow of Fritz’s death!”

She caught her breath and swayed slightly.

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

“He fought—he fought for Anaïs! Can you ever forgive?”

She bent her head and was silent; her fingers worked convulsively. At last she looked up, and in her face was only grief and pity.

“We will not speak of that,” she said. “It is long past. I do not condone the past—but there’s the future. You are still young; you may have many years in which to atone for your fault.”

“But how can I face the world? I have sent in my papers already!—I cannot stay in the French army. I’m a broken man!”

“You have a great name and a great influence. Use them in the service of your country.”

He laughed rather bitterly.

“My country has better men than I to serve her. And I—I am no patriot.”

“Be one now! The talents you possess, your

wealth, your name, use them for the good cause, and in so doing wipe out the stain of the past."

He looked into her face and wavered before the appeal of her eyes.

"My life is valueless," he said, hesitating. "Have I employed my gifts so well that I can hope to make them profitable in the future?"

"No life can be valueless! Think of your mother, Ostenburg! She loves you so well, so tenderly; she lives for you. Will you strike her death-blow when the hope she has clung to is only just fulfilled, when you are only just come home to her?"

His face softened.

"My mother!" he repeated. "Yes, she loves me, but she loves the honour of Ostenburg more; and when she hears—all—"

"She need not hear it. And in any case it would be worse if she heard that her son had died by his own hand—self-confessed a coward. Promise me that you will live—for her sake, Heinz! You owe me that promise."

"And if I promise," he said slowly. "What then?"

"Then you will go to Egon at Berlin, to work, as he is working, for the liberation of our country."

He paced up and down the room with clasped hands. His whole being was in a tumult, and he had not the strength to refuse the light held up to guide him.

"How shall I forget?" he said at last.

"You will not forget, but as you work, as you give yourself to a cause far above mere personal feelings, you will know that the past is forgiven, and remembrance will be less bitter."

He took her hands and looked at her long and

earnestly. Then he spoke in the low voice of one exhausted by long strife :

“ Veronika, you are a good woman ! You are braver, stronger than I. My life is in your hands. Do with it what you will ! ”

Veronika had conquered : his despair, the impotent rage against Fate, needed but a leader to overcome them. He was weak, and the strength of this pure, noble-hearted woman raised him from the dust and inspired all that was best in him to hope still by pointing out that he had something to live for. Her courage reawakened his own ; the noblest strain in him was touched by her forgiveness, and he saw that, though he might never have joy again, there was at least a happiness in duty. The man who had mocked at patriotism was ready to lay down his life for his country, if by such sacrifice he might attain peace : the work Veronika had set him was so far from personal matters, so abstract, that he caught at it as salvation—only let it be arduous, so that in labour he might have rest.

“ And now you will go to bed and sleep,” Veronika said gently.

He took one small lamp and, extinguishing the rest, followed her to the door. There he paused.

“ One thing,” he said, in a broken voice. “ Of her—of Anaïs ; blame me as you will, but don’t be harsh to her memory ! ”

Veronika’s eyes filled with tears.

“ Who am I to judge her ? ” she said. “ I loved her, too—I pity her. Poor, poor Anaïs ! ”

“ You knew that we were betrothed ? ”

“ I knew that.”

“ She cared for me far—far more than I merited ;

and — my God, how I loved her ! If it 's wrong, I don't know, but I shall always love her. My love can never die ! Out there in the snow ; it was cruel — cruel ! ”

He gave a sob and followed Veronika down the long corridor and into the great hall whence the stair went up. As they crossed it the clock struck twelve, with deep strokes that rang and resounded from the stone walls. Suddenly, when the last stroke had died into the echoes, Heinz gave a cry, and Veronika, turning, saw that he gazed down the hall with horror-stricken eyes. The lamp slipped from his hand and crashed down on the pavement, leaving them in darkness save for the moonlight which poured in at a high window.

“ What has happened ? ” cried Veronika, startled.

“ Don't you see them ? ” he said, in a strange, hoarse whisper. “ The moonlight is on their blades ! One in black, the other in red ! But there 's no sound from the steel. Don't you see ? ”

Veronika strained her eyes through the darkness, but the hall was empty and the moonlight fell on bare flags.

“ Freiherr, you are distracted — overwrought,” she said, though she herself was trembling at his tone.

“ Come ! I see nothing.”

He took no heed, but bent forward as if to watch something at the end of the hall. She could see the outline of his tall figure against the moonlight.

“ They are there,” he continued presently. “ You must see them. The man in black presses his opponent. It 's not imagination ; they are there in the moonlight. Oh, what will happen ? It 's horrible, horrible ! ”

Veronika laid her hand on his arm, saying firmly :

"This is folly. Your brain is excited. There is no one in the hall save you and me."

He shook off her hand and gazed still with dreadful fascination, murmuring :

"He has passed the other's guard. I know the red man's face now—it's full in the moonlight! His breast is pierced, and there's a stain on the flags—red, red as the sun. Look! Ah! he falls back, just as Duclos fell! Horrible, horrible! And the woman there—don't you see her? She runs forward. Ah, what a cry! Where are they? It's all gone!"

He staggered back against the wall, pressing his hands to his head.

"What was it?" he said, in a more natural voice, yet still low and awe-stricken.

"A fancy—a vision of your brain," she said, clenching her hands that she might not herself give way: the thing seemed horrible now that it was past. "You are not yourself to-night, Ostenburg!"

He caught at her hand as if to assure himself that she, at least, was tangible.

"You saw nothing?" he asked incredulously.

"Nothing but the moonlight in the hall."

"And yet I saw so plainly!" he mused. "Do you know what it means when that duel appears to an Ostenburg?" he asked, when they had groped their way up-stairs and paused by the door of Veronika's room, where a light was burning.

"Surely you do not believe these old tales!"

"Who knows—who knows? For an Ostenburg it means disgrace; have I not brought disgrace enough already? Why did I not fire that pistol?"

She fetched a candle from her room and put it into his hand.

"Because your life is not your own," she said.
"Be brave—be a true man now. Good-night, Freiherr!"

He pressed her hands to his lips with a broken exclamation and left her. Was it possible to save him? she wondered. Indeed she hardly knew; the man had been so shattered; but the ruins might be built up to a noble edifice yet.

CHAPTER XXX

OSTENBURG SEEKS EXPIATION IN LABOUR

THE pity which, struggling with her own grief at the truth of Fritz's duel, had kept Veronika sleepless, swept away and overcame all resentment when she saw the profound sadness of Ostenburg's face and manner next morning. He seemed a man who had endured until the very power of suffering had subsided, leaving the reaction of a dreadful lassitude in which the mind could exert itself no more. His voice, now that the strain was relaxed, sounded dead and toneless, the fever in his eyes had faded to a mere dull indifference, his head was bowed in dejection. He had lived for the last weeks in a sort of madness; the madness had passed and left him broken and crushed beneath the weight of a pain too great for his strength. Veronika met him with the Freifrau to whom he had just revealed his decision, urging it as a reason for his immediate departure from Ostenburg. The old lady told it as something new to her guest, and Veronika, smiling hopefully at the Freiherr, was rewarded by a gleam of life in his weary eyes: he clung to her strength as the one thing left to support him.

"You approve this decision, Freifrau?" she said. "For my part, you must know how glad I am that your son should join the good cause."

"I approve most heartily," rejoined the Frau von

Ostenburg. "Heinz was the best judge of such affairs, but it never seemed to me wholly fitting that he should serve Napoleon Bonaparte. My only regret is that he must leave home at once, when he has hardly recovered from this—this time of suffering."

"It must be so, Mother," Heinz broke in hurriedly. "I will return to you later, but I must go to Berlin immediately—to-day. The sooner I offer my services the better."

Veronika looked at him and guessed his impatience to take up the burden of labour—guessed, too, that he could not endure another night at Ostenburg. How strange had been that scene in the hall! His conviction at the moment had wrought upon her own, and even now she could not altogether persuade herself that the vision had lived only in his fancy.

Presently she chanced to be alone with him in the sombre drawing-room, where the ancient portraits hung on the walls, looking gravely down on those who abode where they, in their time, had also dwelt. She was working, and he sat silent and dejected in a carved chair by the stove.

"You were wrong to save my life," he said at last, abruptly. "It was n't worth saving. The vision of disgrace came so close on my promise to you—the reality will follow, I know that! You saved me for a worse fate."

"No, no!" she cried, clasping her hands in earnest entreaty. "You must not say that. You will forget, you will wipe off the stain. Surely repentance must win forgiveness, surely your devotion to a noble cause must win it!"

He looked round the room at those stern, dark ancestors pictured on the walls.

"I can't wipe out the stain," he said wearily. "Don't you see how they look at me? They were honourable men—their eyes hurt me. My place is with the Freiherr Wilhelm, whom generations have scorned—the outcast, the dishonoured! But he was happier than I—the man he had injured gave him death. I am denied that!"

"You must not despair," said Veronika, rising and laying her hand on his shoulder. "You have sinned against me also, but I have forgiven you. They will forgive you, for the sake of your labour in the cause of your country. You must be ready to die, if need be, in that cause, but you must not die the death of a coward, of a man who flies from duty. I have your promise, have I not? I can trust the word of an Ostenburg?"

He caught her hand and kissed it reverently.

"Yes, you have my promise," he said. "I will not break it. I could wish it unmade, but I will keep it, because you are my best friend—because I owe you any reparation you demand. Perhaps it is my destiny, my punishment, to live and endure. If labour can expiate, Germany shall have that!"

He held to his word through many days and months, —days and months that dragged wearily on with leaden footsteps,—but the most passionate toil could not still his agony, his despair; day and night the knowledge of some awful retribution to come darkened around him; day and night he heard that groan, saw that red blood staining the snow, saw, too, the duel in the hall at Ostenburg, which, in some strange way, seemed a part of his own life. A worse man would have suffered less; it was the noble impulses of his nature which quickened his remorse and added poignancy to

his regret, it was the pride in his blood which made him shrink under the sense of shame and dishonour.

He found Egon at Berlin and briefly told him his plans, his intentions. In a letter from his wife Pustau had learned something of the reasons which moved him,—not all, for Veronika felt that the secrets she had in a measure surprised must be sacred even from her husband,—but he was too true a friend to hint at his knowledge by word or deed. To no one else did Heinz make the shadow of an explanation ; he stood aloof, proudly and silently, from the speculations which his action aroused, and absorbed himself in his work. His distinction made him a valuable friend and an important foe ; Napoleon paid him the compliment of half an hour's wrath at his desertion and the King of Prussia honoured him with a responsible command—a bribe, it was whispered, though no bribe could have moved the Freiherr von Ostenburg. He fought for his own pardon, for his own peace.

It was remarked that he avoided society and when forced into it was taciturn and melancholy. Gossip assigned the cause to partial truth—the death of Madame Duclos—and the knowledge of this drove him to greater solitude, for his scarred soul could not endure the gaze of the curious, nor the feeling that its deepest pain was pointed to with scorn. While Anaïs lived he had been deaf to the world's talk ; now that she lay beneath the snow he shrank from its cruelty. Once her name was inadvertently mentioned in his hearing, with a word of pity and a breath of disdain, by a man who had known her in Cassel. He felt the insinuation like a stab, and quivered under it ; it was his fault that her memory should be lightly treated ! Could there be a more awful punishment ?

He toiled more ardently at his military duties, finding relief in the devotion of his men who, at first repelled by his silence and sternness, grew at last to trust and to love him. With them he was more like his old self, feeling freer in their ignorance than before the curious glances of his friends. It was perhaps something of the same instinct which made him cling to little Heinz von Pustau when he and his mother joined Egon in Berlin. Veronika, pitiful towards the erring, suffering man, let them be often together, and the child learned to love his godfather only second to his parents, ever quoting the sayings and the doings of "Uncle Heinz." The tenderness of Ostenburg's nature expended itself on the two-year-old baby, in whose clear eyes there could be no reproach, and after playing with him he would be calmer and happier than at any other time. Veronika was glad that her child should do his work of healing.

"You must be a brave man, Heinzchen," she once overheard him say. "Be like your father."

"Like you, too!" laughed the boy.

Ostenburg started and stroked his head with a sort of passionate protest, crying:

"No, no! never like me, little one."

Veronika came forward and touched Heinzchen's shoulder tenderly; Ostenburg looked up with a shudder.

"Like me—it's too horrible!" he said. "Save him from that. Your son must be a good man."

She sent the child away and sat with Ostenburg for a long while, letting him talk or be silent as it pleased him best. In his direst trouble a man will make a confidant of a woman sooner than of another man, and Veronika was such a friend to Heinz as Egon, even, could never have been. She thought she could do

little for him, but the mere contact with her strong, generous nature, the knowledge of her forgiveness, ennobled him and strung his heart to a higher pitch. She gave him courage to endure the weary days, cheered him in his labour, and set before him the hope of the future ; his life, as he had said, was in her hands, to be moulded according to her will ; he worshipped her as one might a saint. The world sometimes wondered that such a woman should have married a quite ordinary man, and whether womanly tenderness blinded her eyes, or whether she read his honest heart more truly than the world did, it were hard to say, but Heinz, who knew them both so well, thought it was the latter, and revered her the more because of her devotion to his friend. Their happiness was the spring at which he refreshed his sad heart, their house, ever open to him, the one place where he could find a measure of peace.

At last came the declaration of war and the departure of the troops from Berlin. On the evening before he left, Ostenburg went to say good-bye to Frau von Pustau, and they talked together long and earnestly. She was sad, too, for it was the first time since their marriage that Egon had followed arms, and she could not but fear for him.

" If there is a danger from which I can save him, he shall be saved," Heinz said. " If I could give my life for his, how willingly should I do it ! As for me, you know what I desire—pray that I may obtain it, for your prayers will surely be answered."

" I will pray that you may be a true and loyal soldier of your country," she rejoined.

" That if you will—but that I can never be. The best I may ask is an honourable death."

"An honourable life, Freiherr !"

"There is neither honour nor happiness left for me in life. You stayed my hand when I would have ended my misery, but perhaps French bullets will be less cruel. I hope for their mercy."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"No, no !" she urged, "you must not despair in this way. What can I say to make you see more clearly ? I——"

He interrupted her :

"If there are angels they must be like you, Veronika, but I am beyond the help even of an angel. Life will only bring me to some irretrievable dishonour—perhaps to madness. The one thing I could wish to live for would be to see Heinzchen a man and to be near you sometimes, for you have given me, in these last months, all of happiness that I have known—you and Egon. But even so—it's better not. You don't need me, and I would rather Heinzchen remembered me as I am now. Perhaps some day you will tell him my story,—tenderly, as one speaks of the dead. Veronika, don't wish me to live."

She looked at him sadly, and knew that he was right. An honourable death would be the best to ask for him, and the tears that should fall on his grave need not be tears of regret. A shattered vase can never be mended, and Heinz had not the strength to build up a new life for himself; he would sink beneath the burden, letting the nobler part of his nature flicker low, like an oilless lamp, and at last die, as he said, in ignoble madness. Better that the flame should blaze high in some heroic deed and be extinguished suddenly in its glory by the breath of war—better that !

"I have tried to forget," he said ; "but it's impos-

sible. She—she was the only thing I lived for, and through me—oh, Veronika ! there 's neither peace nor forgiveness left for such a man as I."

" You should not speak like that," she said again, softly. " There is always forgiveness. Must you go now ? Come, Heinzchen, and say good-bye to your uncle ! "

The child ran up from the other end of the room where he had been playing contentedly with some imaginary thing, as lonely children will do.

" You 're going to the war, like father ? " he asked with his clear, baby voice.

" Yes ; I 'm going to the war."

" I wish I were a soldier, too ! " the child declared, catching at Ostenburg's sword. " I should always wear a sword then, should n't I ? "

" Yes," said Veronika, smiling at him ; " a soldier always wears a sword, and he draws it to fight for his country."

Heinz took the child up in his arms and kissed him.

" You must take care of your mother now," he said. " She does n't want you to go and fight just yet ! "

He kissed Veronika's hand, and with a murmured " God bless you ! " was gone. She went to the window and looked out after him, then sank down on a chair, covering her face.

" Mother, why are you crying ? " asked Heinzchen, running to her and pulling down her fingers.

She caught him up and kissed him passionately. Her tears were for one who had had the promise of greatness and who had blighted that promise and trailed the beauty of his nature in the dust.

CHAPTER XXXI

GENERAL DUCLOS FULFILLS HIS REVENGE

NIGHT had spread her mantle over the battlefield of Leipzig ; the opposing armies, exhausted by two days' struggle, paused before the last attack. Napoleon, hard pressed by the Allies, withdrew his men into a closer formation, so that they formed a circle round the city ; Blücher on the north and Schwartzberg on the south made the necessary arrangements for a decisive action, and thus both armies awaited the dawn.

At midnight, Ostenburg and Pustau, whose regiment was in the division of Prince Augustus of Prussia, went out with a handful of men to reconnoitre. Silently they crept towards the French lines and at last were almost within earshot of the watch-fires. A great hum of life, mingled with the groans of the wounded and dying, rose from the vast camp ; before them the suburbs of Leipzig stood darkly ; on either side the broken ground was studded with fires, as the heaven above was with stars. They reached the shelter of some outhouses, and there left the men ; they themselves stole forward and, crouching by a hedge, strained their eyes and ears to catch the movements of that part of the enemy which was near them. Suddenly on their right appeared the figure of a man muffled in a long cloak ; he passed so close that they might have touched

him, and for an instant his face was revealed by the moonlight. Pustau, absorbed by the fear of discovery, took no heed of it, but Ostenburg started back with a low cry of horror and caught at his companion's sleeve. Fortunately his cry was not heard—perhaps, loud as it sounded to Pustau's keenly alive senses, it had been no more than a breath—and without discovery they reached their men and returned to camp.

"What made you call out so?" asked Egon, as they neared their own bivouac fire. "Lucky that no one heard!"

Ostenburg raised a white, drawn face.

"Did n't you see? That man who passed us?"

"Of course I saw him! What do you mean?"

"You did not recognise him?"

"Why, no. There was only the moonlight!"

Heinz gripped his hand and whispered with white lips:

"It was Duclos!"

"Duclos! Heinz, Duclos is dead!"

"Sometimes the wronged rise up from their graves to call for vengeance!"

"But that man was alive. Your fancy must have misled you!"

"No; I saw him clearly for an instant. His face had changed—it had grown hard and cruel—but I knew it. There was the red scar from brow to lip—the scar I made—and it was fiery like a live coal."

They were close to the fire now, and one of the officers who were sitting round it asked the news.

"We've discovered little," said Egon, throwing himself down on the ground and lighting his pipe. "The French are on the move—closing round Leipzig, I expect. To-morrow Napoleon plays his last card."

Ostenburg stood silent with bent head then, wrapped his cloak more closely around him and strode off in the direction of headquarters. Egon glanced after him anxiously ; that strange hallucination—for it could be nothing else—made him afraid, afraid of a thing which had crossed his mind once or twice before—that Heinz was going mad. As if in answer to his thoughts a Major said idly :

“ How changed is Ostenburg from the man who served with me in '7 ! Never a word more than necessary—eyes that seem as though they saw some horror to come ! ”

“ He's never been the same since that scandal about Madame— ” began a younger man idly.

“ Hush ! no names,” broke in another. “ Pustau, you know him well. What is wrong with him ? ”

Egon took his pipe from his mouth.

“ I should be very glad if I knew that,” he said with a sigh. “ Then one might cure him. But there is no cause to complain of him as a leader, surely ! The rest, after all, concerns himself.”

“ As a leader ! ” cried a subaltern. “ Why no ! What regiment could desire a better Colonel ? Think of his charge at Gross Beeren ! The men adore him.”

Egon relapsed into silence while the rest retold Ostenburg's deeds. Half an hour later he sought him in his tent, and found him sitting idle, with sad eyes fixed on the ground. He started as he felt a hand on his shoulder, then looked up and gave a nervous laugh, saying :

“ Only you, old fellow ! I was afraid it was—the others. They never leave one alone ! ”

“ And you would rather I left you alone—I know that ! But it's not good for you.”

"Nothing is bad for me, or good—now! What does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal to me that my oldest friend is grown surly as a bear!"

Heinz caught at his hand and wrung it.

"Forgive me," he said. "It's only for a little while—I trust it's only for a little while! Surely he came to tell me that the end was at hand! By God, he's been revenged fully enough!"

Egon put his hand on his shoulder in sudden fear.

"Heinz, are you mad?" he cried. "You do not believe in ghosts?"

Ostenburg laughed again—a laugh that was not pleasant to hear.

"There are ghosts for such as I! You know—I saw it—the duel at home!" His voice sank to a hoarse whisper, and he glanced fearfully round the tent. "Was n't there a face over there—behind the bed? I am sure I saw him, with the scar. Look, Egon, look!"

Pustau went to the end of the tent and passed his hand over the canvas.

"There's nothing," he said. "Heinz, you must rid yourself of these fancies—you are ill!"

"The mind diseased—perhaps that! The body well—too well to die! But it was n't fancy that night at Ostenburg with your wife, Egon, and it was n't fancy when I was there in the truce. Twice I've seen it with my own eyes,—the duel, the red stain on the flags, the moonlight on the steel,—twice I've heard the woman's cry! They come to me because I have brought disgrace to Ostenburg."

"Heinz, you will grow mad if you think of it like this!" cried Egon again.

"Perhaps! Madness would be best if the end did not come. There's neither hope nor help left for me!"

Egon was silent—a man of few words, he knew not what to say that might strengthen or console this man in the bitterness and the solitude of spirit which was upon him. He had not realised before how much this fine nature was bent and warped, or how much those daring feats of arms had been the mere carelessness of one whose life has no value in his own eyes.

"Your life is of use still," he urged at last, with a strange tenderness in his voice. "If you had heard how they spoke of you just now—how they praised your courage——"

"My courage!" interrupted Ostenburg with a bitter laugh. "The courage of one who dares not face his own thoughts, who dares not to look behind him in his own tent, who hears day and night the groan of the man he has wronged! That's a fine courage!"

"Can I give you no comfort?" cried Egon despairingly.

"There's only one comfort left, and, by Heaven, if it does not come to-morrow, I'll break my promise to your wife! Why have I been spared so long? A bullet passed through my sleeve the day before yesterday, and twice my horse was shot under me. Rosenberg fell the other day; he has a mother and a bride to mourn him, a stainless career to be regretted. Mersenstein died by a chance shot at Gross Beeren, and they tell me his wife is almost mad with grief. Think of the dead lying round us to-night! Thousands of men who would do honour to their country have fallen, and I—I, who ask for death as the greatest boon life can give, I am denied it. What does it mean

but that Fate holds some deeper shame in store for me—something that will stain my shield for ever? To-morrow I must die! I will ride into the French ranks, I will put myself at the very mouth of their cannon! Perhaps such a death may be my absolution—Egon, do you think it?”

“The cause is sacred; I trust that for the sake of such a death we may all be forgiven.”

“The cause sacred! Yes, I know that! But I cannot fight for a cause—I cannot give my heart to it. I remember once that I told you how I envied your simple conviction; I envy it now. To believe supremely in something greater than ourselves, that alone can give peace. I have lived for myself and for one other, I have been swayed by so many sympathies; this is the end of it! Stay with me to-night, Egon! It may be for the last time.”

Eager to do anything that might help or console his friend, Egon agreed. He slept fitfully, ever conscious of a tall figure that strode up and down the tent. When he awoke the same figure was near at hand, giving orders sharply and briefly in a dull, toneless voice. The last day of the struggle had dawned, and in the Allied ranks a solemn expectancy reigned—the pause of a lion before the spring.

At nine the advance had begun. From the towers of Leipzig men watched the innumerable multitude of the Allies,—the deep masses of infantry, the glittering squadrons of cavalry,—heard the confused murmur of neighing horses and tramping feet, drowned presently by the awful roar of a thousand cannon. France gallantly made her last stand, but at the very beginning of the day the defection of a brigade of Saxon Cavalry, followed immediately by that of the Würtemberg Horse,

cast a gloom over her ranks. On the north, Blücher and Bernadotte drove the enemy to the very walls of Leipzig ; on the south, not even the heroic resistance of the Poles under Poniatowski and the presence of the Emperor himself could suffice to stay the advance of the Allies. Lieberwolkwitz and Wachau were abandoned after a slight combat of advanced posts, and soon two hundred pieces of cannon, arrayed along the heights, began to hurl death into the French columns. Napoleon's batteries, inferior in point of numbers, sought to supply this deficiency by the rapidity of their fire, and thus, in the very centre of the army, a space of not more than half a league in breadth was swept by the storm of eight hundred pieces of artillery. Dense smoke obscured the glitter of bayonet and lance, and the groans of the wounded were silenced by the voice of mighty guns. There was time neither to speak nor think, scarcely time to fear the death whose shafts were falling so thickly.

While this terrible fire was in progress Prince Augustus of Prussia and General Pirsch received orders, with Kleist's corps, to carry Probstheyda, a village which formed the salient angle of the French position round Leipzig. Ostenburg, white and calm at the head of his regiment, breathed a low "At last!" as the aide-de-camp, who had ridden through a hail of shot from Kleist, gave him the command. Surely in that death-strewn space he would not be passed over! With a swift, eloquent glance at Egon, he swung himself round on his charger and, rising in his stirrups, shouted a brief order. His face was strangely excited, and the grey eyes glowed with a consuming fire.

Swiftly the Prussians advanced, and so vigorous was

their onslaught that the centre of the village was reached before they could be arrested ; there Victor and Lauriston, at the head of dense masses, fell on them with reckless gallantry. Ostenburg had passed through unscathed, and Egon, at his heels, saw his white face in the thickest of the press, his reddened sword waving on the men. Suddenly he reeled in the saddle ; Egon, spurring forward, heard a low cry of horror break from his lips, saw that his hand slackened on the rein, that his sword slipped from nerveless fingers. A man with a general's plume was bearing down from the right, and Pustau, following Ostenburg's awful glance, saw his face—the face of Jean Duclos, distorted by diabolical laughter, scarred from brow to lip by a deep red mark, and lit with glaring, horrible eyes. For an instant the Freiherr stayed motionless, then as Duclos, thrusting aside all that came between, rushed upon him, he turned his horse and, heedless of his friend's blade on his shoulder, fled backward through his own men who, appalled, gave way before him.

For an instant there was a confused pause, then, fighting every inch of the way, the Prussians were forced to retire. With a groan Egon gathered the remnants of the regiment. He led them still when Prince Augustus re-formed his men and again entered Probstheyda, this time expelling the French. In the short breathing-space before Napoleon himself hastened to the village to arrest the retreat of his men, Egon reached the spot where Duclos had appeared, and found the General lying dead, with a shot through his heart and that horrible laughter set like a mask on his face. There could be no mistake ; it was not a sceptre risen from the tomb, but the man himself, accomplish-

ing a revenge more full and more terrible than he could ever have dreamed. A young officer, slightly wounded, lay near Duclos, and him Egon questioned.

"Yes, it is General Duclos," he said. "He was a prisoner in Russia for some months—escaped by a miracle from a terrible wound. He only joined the Emperor a few months ago. You knew him? He is changed since his imprisonment, they say. His wife died in the retreat from Moscow and that almost turned his brain."

Egon bent his head with a groan. Why was not Ostenburg among the dead who strewed the little village?

At the end of the day they found him in his tent, indifferent, almost stupefied. It was Egon who had to take his sword; he yielded it up as if in a dream, and as if in a dream suffered himself to be put under arrest by a strong guard. Egon's eyes were dim, but his own were dry and hard.

"I knew it," he said when they were alone together for an instant. "Did n't you see him to-day?"

In a few brief words Egon told him the truth; he had to know it sooner or later. With little change of the dull despair he bowed his head in his hands, saying in a lifeless voice:

"He had a full revenge, then! Egon, why did death spare me for this? Why was there no mercy in lead or steel to save me from being a branded coward?"

CHAPTER XXXII

VERONIKA PERFORMS A HARD TASK

THE downfall of Napoleon's power involved that of the kingdoms which he had made. Westphalia, already shaken by the occupation of Tschernischev, was on the eve of dissolution, and Jerome's last act, before a precipitate flight, was to conceal the news of Leipzig from the public for a week. Yet the placard which announced a victory for the Fourth Army Corps under Bertrand deceived no one and, in the agony of suspense which followed, those whose hearts were with the cause of Germany felt their hope rise high.

Veronika, who had returned to Pustau at the beginning of the war, was not the least anxious among those who watched and waited for news. The uncertainty was hard to bear, and though every day confirmed the rumours of victory by some sign, some significant action on the part of the French in Cassel, the very magnitude of that victory must make her fear the cost. When would she hear from Egon? Would she ever hear?

At last one evening, while she was telling Heinzchen a story and trying in his baby unconsciousness of danger to forget her own apprehensions, a letter was brought to her. For an instant she dared not look at it and her eyes met those of the servant with a sudden appeal. He was an old man who had served the

Pustaus from boyhood, and he understood, for he also loved Egon.

"Thank God, it 's from the Herr Graf, *gnädige Frau*," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "I know his writing too well to be mistaken."

She looked down, recognised the straggling, unformed characters—Egon wrote very badly—and tore the cover with trembling fingers. Yes, he was well and unwounded—so much she grasped at a first hasty glance; then with throbbing pulses and quick-drawn breath she read over and over the tale of victory. Egon used no fine words, wrote no glowing, picturesque descriptions, but the splendour of the deed gave force and dignity to his simple narrative, so that it rang like a trumpet-blast in Veronika's ears and set her face aglow with pride and thankfulness. The great tyrant was fallen, Germany was free, the cause to which she had given her soul had triumphed.

The old servant lingered, eager for the news, but too well-mannered to ask it. Presently she looked up and saw him.

"Yes, the Herr Graf is safe," she said. "The French have suffered a great defeat at Leipzig."

The man clasped his hands in thankfulness and left her. Her eyes were on the letter again, but little Heinz, impatient at being so long neglected, pulled at her sleeve.

"I want the end of the story, Mother," he said.

She caught him to her knee.

"We can't think of that story now," she told him. "Father has written me a new story. You shall hear that."

And in simple words she painted for him the great thing that had happened, painted it so that even his

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baby brain caught some echo of her enthusiasm, some glow of her triumph.

"You must never forget, Heinzchen," she ended. "You must always remember to-day, because to-day we have heard the most splendid news that could ever be heard, and because your father helped to make it. Promise me that you will remember!"

"Yes, I'll remember," whispered the child solemnly. Then with sudden change of mood—"Does n't Uncle Heinz send me his love?"

In all Egon's letters there had been some message from Ostenburg to his godson; once even a little note enclosed, and that was best of all, better than the toy sword he had sent in the summer.

"I have n't read all the letter," said Veronika, unfolding it again, with some self-reproach. She had been so absorbed in her own happiness and in the news of victory that she had forgotten the son of that other woman who awaited tidings at Ostenburg. Had the end which he longed for come?

Heinzchen watched her read, and presently, baby though he was, he saw that her face changed and whitened with a look that made him afraid. He caught at her arm, crying:

"Mother, Mother! why do you look like that?"

She let the paper slip from her fingers, and turned to him with a start; the great flood of pity had swept away the thought of victory, husband, son. Why had Heinz been saved for this? What fatal instinct had made her stay his hand that night at Ostenburg? This thing was too awful, too terrible! But the child was begging her to speak, and he must be answered, although he could not know the truth.

"Uncle Heinz is very ill," she said. "Too ill to

send you a message to-day. Now I have a great deal to do, and you must go up-stairs to nurse."

The child looked grave.

"I'm sorry for Uncle Heinz," he said, as he trotted off obediently. "It hurts to be ill."

Veronika watched him go, with a fresh ache in her heart. What would it be to her if Heinzchen were to stand before the world branded with such a brand of shame? What would this be to the Freifrau von Ostenburg—the proud, stern woman whose love and pride were so closely joined? Would she forgive her son? Would she have pity? Surely; for whatever Heinzchen might do his mother could never refuse him that! With a sudden impulse she flew to the door and knelt beside the child before he could turn the handle.

"Promise that you'll always be brave, darling!" she said.

"Of course," he answered, with wide-open eyes. "Men are always brave. Father's brave and Uncle Heinz—they have gone to fight."

Veronika kissed him and let him go. Then she turned back and read her husband's letter through once more. The thing seemed too horrible to be true. When so many had fallen, could death not have reached Ostenburg also?

"The Freifrau must know sooner or later," Egon wrote. "To send her such news by letter would be too cruel; if she hears by chance it will be even worse. Veronika, it is a dreadful task, but can you break it to her? Poor thing, it is enough to kill her! She loves him so much."

Veronika shuddered. She did not usually flinch before a hard duty, but this seemed one beyond her strength. She hesitated an instant, then set her teeth

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and rang the bell. Half an hour later she started in her carriage for Ostenburg.

It was dark when she arrived ; the mass of the great house stood up sombrely before her and the trees of the avenue whispered together, as if the wind had told them the awful secret and had revealed the spectre of shame which they must welcome under their branches. Veronika clasped her hands tightly. The sound of her own carriage-wheels was charged with dreadful meaning ; the servant's loud knock on the door echoed with strange insistence ; it seemed that the import of her message was already patent to the ancient house : there was no need for her to speak. She ascended the steps and entered the hall among the hurrying footmen who had hastened to admit her, then paused for an instant and looked round ; the old house appeared a living thing which she must hurt and grieve—she felt the spirits of the past pressing around and stretching out powerless hands to her, as if she were able to avert the doom. She understood what it all meant : the proud house shamed by its son, the proud mother's heart to be stabbed and crushed. The very pictures on the wall looked down with melancholy eyes ; the carved coat-of-arms in the stone-work and on the chairs, the ancient weapons which had seen so much honourable warfare — all these things seemed to express reproach. It was terrible, this desolation that a man's wrongdoing could bring ! The Freiherr von Ostenburg could not fall alone ; on every side ruin must follow his ruin.

She hurried forward to the parlour door, but Veit stopped her with a broken appeal for news ; she glanced round and saw that the other servants listened eagerly, curiously. Soon they would despise their master !

"Bad news," she said. "I must tell your mistress first. You shall hear later."

The Freifrau was spinning; she greeted Veronika with no outward agitation, though she guessed that something more than common must bring her at so late an hour; her splendid figure in the severe black dress seemed a very part of the house. Veronika shuddered; why must her hand deal the blow?

"There has been a great battle at Leipzig," she began, seeking for her words; her own voice sounded harsh and strange.

The Freifrau broke in, asking first, not for Heinz, but for the fortune of the day and for Egon. Then with a sudden lighting of the eyes, she said,—

"And my son?"

How should Veronika ever pronounce the awful thing that must be spoken! Her voice shook as she replied:

"Freifrau, I bring bad news of him. Are you prepared to hear it?"

"I read it in your face. He is wounded? Then I must go to him!"

The task became more terrible. Veronika came forward and fell on her knees by the old lady's chair.

"It is worse than that," she said very gently. "It is the worst you could possibly hear."

The hand that Frau von Ostenburg rested on the arm of her chair quivered, but she gave no other sign.

"He is dead?" she asked slowly, and very proudly. "We have always known how to give what is most precious to us in an honourable cause. Germany has asked a very precious thing of me, but God forbid that I should grudge it. He died as an Ostenburg should. I wish he had left a child to honour his name!"

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“ *Gnädige Frau*, your son is alive and uninjured.”

“ Alive? Uninjured? And yet you bring me bad news of him! What do you mean, Veronika?”

Veronika gave a sob and bent her head. She could not bear to meet the Freifrau’s keen eyes.

“ It hurts me to speak as much as it will hurt you to hear,” she said at last, steeling herself. “ Yet I must speak, and you must hear. In a moment of madness, of—oh, how shall I say it?—in a moment when he was not himself, for we know him to have been the bravest of the brave, your son left his post at the head of his regiment.”

The Freifrau started up, white, indignant.

“ It is false!” she cried. “ No Ostenburg ever left his post in the hour of danger! Who has sent you to tell me this lie?”

Veronika sprang to her feet and clasped her hands in agony.

“ Alas! it’s the truth,” she said. “ Egon wrote of it in his letter to me, and you know that Egon loves your son as if they were brothers. Awful as it is, it is the truth! I wish my lips had not to speak such truth!”

“ Show me the letter! I will not believe it! There is some mistake.”

Veronika put the letter into her hand, and she read what Egon had written. Slowly she understood, and her face grew hard and set.

“ Dishonoured! dishonoured!” she said at last, in a quiet, even voice. “ A coward before Germany, before the world! Thank God, he has no son!”

There was an awful pause. Veronika kept silence, for there are some pains in which comfort is an insult; but the Freifrau’s calmness, so much more dreadful

than tears or outcries, terrified her, and at last she caught at her arm with a broken appeal for mercy, for palliation.

"There is no palliation for dishonour," was the answer to her cry. "The court-martial will, of course, condemn him to death."

"Surely, Freifrau, we shall be able to soften the sentence. You need not fear. Your influence, the extenuating circumstances, the services of your son——"

Frau von Ostenburg drew herself up, saying coldly :

"A coward is no son of mine ! The Freiherr von Ostenburg deserves death, and I see no reason to quarrel with any sentence the court-martial may pronounce."

"But surely you cannot deny him your pity?" cried Veronika. "You will not utterly cast him off?"

"A coward cannot be called my son," the old lady repeated. "For some sins there is no forgiveness. Will you excuse me for a few moments? I need time to think. This news——"

She broke off and swayed a little as she laid her hand on the door-handle. Veronika sprang forward to help her, but she recovered herself and motioned her away.

"A moment's faintness," she said as she left the room.

Veronika went back to the fire and stood still for a long while, wondering at the strength of this woman, the pride. Her own eyes were wet, but the Freifrau's had been dry ; her voice had broken as she told the news, the Freifrau's had barely quivered—but Veronika knew that a sharp sword had pierced her heart, and knew, too, that she to whom Ostenburg might have turned for pity and forgiveness would grant him neither. A coward was not her son!

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Half an hour later Veit came in hastily and closed the door.

"The Frau Freifrau wishes to speak to you in the hall," he said. "*Gnädige Frau*, what has happened? She says nothing. Is—is my master killed?"

She knew the man's fidelity and long service, and briefly she told him all; he stood as if thunderstruck.

"But the Freiherr must have been ill—beyond himself!" he cried at last. "To do such a thing! To bring such a disgrace on the family! My poor master!"

"Veit, he will need all your faithfulness," said Veronika. "He will have to endure much. Let him keep your affection—I know he values it. I fear the Freifrau will never forgive him."

Veit covered his face with his hands.

"Poor master!" he said again. "*Gnädige Frau*, the Frau Freifrau will not forgive disgrace. But I understand; it was the deed of a sick man—of one who is not accountable for his actions. If my service be of any use to him, he shall have that, let the world say what it will. I knew well enough that there was something wrong when he was at home in the summer. It was not my place to ask questions, but I knew it all the same."

Veronika held out her hand, and he kissed it respectfully.

"You're a good servant," she said. "Go to the Herr Freiherr. Perhaps you may help him. Even one face that does not despise him will be a comfort. I will do what I can for your mistress."

A group of servants were gathered at one end of the hall, pale and fearful under the stress of the unknown grief which awaited the house. They were talking

together in whispers, but suddenly grew silent as Veronika passed.

She found the Freifrau still in that horrible calm, with no traces of tears upon her cheeks. She was dressed in outdoor garments.

"You will understand that I can no longer remain under the roof of the Freiherr von Ostenburg," she explained quietly.

"You wish to go away at once?"

"It is impossible that I should do otherwise after the Freiherr's conduct; his house is no longer a fit abode for honourable men and women. I wish to ask if you will give me hospitality for a day or two—that is, until I shall have had time to mature my plans. I would not take such a liberty save under the greatest stress, but Pustau is easily reached. If you agree, we will start immediately. I am sure you will let me come."

"I am ready to do everything I can for you," said Veronika, her heart almost breaking with pity; the supreme rights of grief must be obeyed, whatever they might be. Time might soften the Freifrau, but now persuasion would only dash without avail against the rock of her bitterness.

Together they set out in Veronika's carriage, and never once did the old lady fail or break down; only her face grew every moment sterner and more cold. But when she alighted at Pustau in the grey dawn she tottered and fell in a dead faint at Veronika's feet.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE COWARD

O STENBURG underwent the court-martial which condemned him to death like one in a dream. His judges wondered at his calmness, and indeed when the sentence was pronounced he was more unmoved than they. It seemed to him that all this was merely what he had been waiting for ever since his duel with Duclos ; the sword hanging over him had fallen, and its fall gave him in a measure relief—it would soon be over now, this agony that men called life. The madness through which he had passed was dispelled. He was sane—sobered by the shock of his disgrace and by the knowledge that he had fled from no spectre but from a living man, his deadly foe—restored to the clear judgment of things which had been obscured for so long. He looked back and understood—understood with a torturing clearness, though the past seemed to have belonged to some other man. But the end of it all was very near ; each day brought him closer to death.

Then they told him that his sentence had been commuted to degradation and perpetual exile on his estate of Ostenburg—"in consideration," the order ran, "of his former distinguished services and from regard to the honourable position which his family had always held." He shuddered at such mercy, which seemed to

him not mercy but cruelty. It was awful enough to endure the shame alone; what would it be to stand before the eyes of a pitiless world while that shame was proclaimed on the housetops, while his honours were torn from him one by one? What would it be to live for years an outcast, beyond the pale of human fellowship, beyond the reach of even his mother's love? Duclos had indeed accomplished a revenge that might satisfy the most implacable enemy! Before there had seemed something grand in his despair; now he was crushed, humiliated, trodden down like a worm beneath the feet of passers-by, afraid—he, the proud man whose name had been a synonym for courage—and branded with the most shameful epithet a soldier can bear,—coward! The word echoed from every wall in his cell, rang in his ears night and day, etched itself on his brain indelibly. Heinz von Ostenburg was a coward; what communion could a coward have with his fellows, what hope in the future? Better, far better, that they should have allowed him to die!

There came to him no word of pity, of kindness. He wrote to his mother, but no answer was sent. He understood: she had renounced him, even as the shades of his ancestors would renounce him. Henceforth his name must be hidden away, among those honourable generations, with that other outcast, the Freiherr Wilhelm. That cousin whom he knew so slightly would reign at Ostenburg. His time was over.

They brought him to Cassel, again under the sway of the Elector, to endure the punishment he had earned. On the afternoon before his degradation he was sitting in the cell—motionless, his face hidden in his hands—torturing himself with the thought of those disdainful eyes which would rest upon him to-morrow, here, in

the very place where he had been fêted, honoured, loved. The mere imagination of the scene gave his sensitive pride the acutest agony ; how should he ever endure it calmly ? He felt a dread that he should break down, or faint, or not be able to bear it quietly. If only it were over !

He was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to heed that the tread of the sentinel outside the door paused and that there was a murmur of voices, but the harsh grating of the key in the lock roused him and he muttered an oath, angry that he should be disturbed. Then, as the door swung open, he heard the rustling of a woman's dress and sprang to his feet wondering ; the door was shut from without ; Veronika von Pustau with her little son by her side stood in the cell. There was an infinitude of pity in her grey eyes as she stretched out her hands towards him, but he shrank back.

" You must not come near me ! " he cried. " I 'm not fit to touch the hand of a good woman ! You—you know—— "

She bent and whispered to Heinzchen, who ran forward and held up his face to be kissed. Ostenburg's eyes softened.

" You 've brought the child to me," he said, " to me—a branded criminal ! "

" Why not ? " she answered gently, and Heinzchen caught impatiently at his godfather's sleeve.

Ostenburg hesitated a moment, then bent down and lifted the boy, who began chattering merrily. He laughed with delight when Ostenburg set him on the table and, kneeling before him and still keeping one arm round him, held his great gold watch to his ears as he always used to do. As he kneeled there Heinz

almost forgot; the springs of tenderness were unsealed in his heart, and he felt no more altogether an outcast and alone.

"But—but where's your sword, Uncle Heinz?" the child asked presently. "You always used to wear it!"

Ostenburg gave a groan and sprang to his feet, then turned to the window to hide the tears that blinded his eyes. Heinzchen slipped off the table and ran to his mother, saying:

"What is the matter with Uncle Heinz? Is he angry with me? Look—he's crying!"

Veronika stroked his head.

"He's not angry with you, darling," she whispered; "but go and play in the corner now, for I have something to say to him. See, you can have the book father brought you this morning!"

The boy obeyed, and Frau von Pustau laid her long white hand on Ostenburg's shoulder.

"Have you no word for me?" she asked.

He turned and caught at her hand.

"You can look at me like that when you know everything!" he murmured brokenly.

"Perhaps, Heinz, because I know everything."

"Oh, thank you—thank you! I am glad to have seen you and the boy again. And yet—perhaps it would have been best if you had left me to my despair."

"I want to help you not to despair. Egon would have come, but he could not because of his position. A woman may do as she likes, and it is with his wish that I have brought the boy. You are not angry?"

He kissed her hand.

"Angry? Angry with an angel sent to tell me that there is compassion left for a—coward? How can you come to one dishonoured and disgraced?"

"You were as much a coward before, Heinz, yet I saw you then."

"Not openly disgraced, at least! But I know what you mean,—I have been a coward from the first. If I had been brave enough to leave Cassel when—when I knew who she was, I should not have run away at Leipzig. They called me brave, but I was a coward then—a coward through and through. I was not brave enough to leave her."

"Then you will be brave in the future. Yes, what you did at Leipzig was only the punishment for what went before!"

He groaned.

"The future? What a future! Why did you save my life that night at Ostenburg, Veronika? If I had died then——"

"It would have been a coward's death—running away from your responsibilities."

"I prayed for an honourable death in battle, and this is all I gain! And not even death! Oh, it was not mercy to change the sentence!"

"Yes, it was mercy. You have many years given you in which to retrieve your honour."

"But how? The stain can never be wiped out."

"It can, by bearing your punishment bravely. It will want courage. But try! Be brave now! You can never be a great man, but you may be a useful one!"

She spoke appealingly, urgently. He looked at her with his weary eyes, and almost believed her.

"Then you think I have something to live for?" he asked.

She came forward and sat down on the little wooden bench under the barred window near him, and spoke to him with tender earnestness. He listened as a child

might to the wise counsel of an elder, and at last began to think that there was hope even for him. She spoke of the peasants on his estate, the vast influence for good he might have over them ; she urged him to use his great talents in the perfecting of some invention for the good of mankind, in the writing of books to delight the world ; she showed him, humbly, as one who knows sorrow and weakness, how in the awful solitude of his life, in the patient endurance of it, he might wipe out the stain of the past and at last attain to peace.

“ Then, in spite of all, you don’t altogether despise me ? ” he asked presently.

“ No one has a right to despise another, because he cannot know whether his own strength might not fail under like temptation. You have sinned, Heinz, you have wasted talent, influence, opportunity, but now you will try to be brave, will you not ? ”

He bent his head.

“ I will try,” he said very humbly. “ If you don’t altogether despise me, I can live still—I can perhaps even do some good with what remains of my life.”

There was a long pause. Veronika watched him as he sat there on the bench beside her with clasped hands and bowed head. He looked many years older than his real age, and his face, always thin, was drawn and pinched with the agony of what he had endured. Veronika’s heart swelled with pity, and she prayed that he might not have to suffer his punishment for very long,—it hurt her to think of the isolation, the loneliness in which he must live,—but she trusted him now, trusted that he would do his utmost to wipe out the stain of the past ; as once before he had put his life between her hands, to be moulded as she thought fit. At last he looked up, and there was in his eyes a glow of

hope, of courage, which had been strange to them for many days.

"How can I ever thank you for coming?" he said in a low, fervent voice. "I thought everyone had abandoned me and,—though I deserved it,—that was the hardest to bear. Even my mother has sent no word. Veronika, have you seen her?"

"She is in our house."

"Ah, I understand! She would not stay at Ostenburg. I have sinned beyond forgiveness."

Veronika laid her hand on his arm, saying,—

"Heinz, you must bear one thing more!"

He started.

"She's not dead?"

"No. But very ill—so ill that I fear she cannot recover. And she does not speak of you!"

"I've killed her, too," he groaned. "Mother, Mother, I must win your forgiveness! To-morrow I'll try and come to her, after—after— Can you let me know how she is?"

"Yes, I will try—I will do my best!"

There was a knock at the door. Veronika rose.

"Hark!" she said. "I must go. They will not let me stay longer."

"One thing more!" he begged. "You know—to-morrow, in the Friedrichsplatz—there will be many people to watch, to mock me—it will be terrible to endure. Veronika, will you be there? If I could look at you I think I could bear it better. Is it too much to ask?"

"I will be there," she said. She knew what it would mean for him to stand there shamed before the eyes of the world—he, an Ostenburg and Graumoden, with a double heritage of unconquerable pride.

He kissed both her hands, saying simply, "Thank you!" With a very beautiful impulse she bent forward and touched his forehead with her lips. His eyes glowed, and for an instant a great peace fell on his face; her sympathy raised him from the dust.

"There is one thing you must hear," she said gently. "Egon is broken-hearted, for it is he who to-morrow——"

He cut her short:

"I know it—I knew it. He must do his duty. I am glad, for so I shall see him once again." He paused, then pleaded brokenly: "Veronika, must I forget? I cannot—that is too hard for me. I love her still, I cannot forget. Will you forgive that?"

She took his hand again and her eyes filled with tears.

"Surely that is not wrong," she said. "Surely you need not forget! A great love must have something beautiful in it, something that may be remembered when all the wrong has been burned away and—and yours was indeed a great love. I loved her too, Heinz, and I think of her very often. Come, Heinzchen, you must say good-bye to your godfather now!"

The child ran from the corner where he had been sitting with his book. Ostenburg lifted him and clung to him passionately; then he unfastened his watch and put the chain round his neck.

"You can keep that always," he said, as he set him down.

"Always?" echoed the boy joyfully. "Is it my very own?"

"Your very own."

"Thank you, Uncle Heinz," he cried, putting up his face to be kissed.

“ You won’t tell him ! ” pleaded Ostenburg. “ I should like him to love me still.”

Veronika promised it with a smile. She wrung Ostenburg’s hand again, saying: “ I shall be there to-morrow. You can trust me ! ” and so went, leading the child by the hand.

He watched the door close upon her, then sank down on the little bench and covered his face with his hands. The tears that trickled from between his fingers were tears of healing brought forth by Veronika’s touch.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DEGRADATION

TROOPS were drawn up in a square round the Friedrichsplatz, and behind them a motley crowd pressed and swarmed. Some members of it were merely curious, some half-compassionate, some full of righteous indignation against the man who had proved himself a coward ; but to all it was a sight to see—this degradation of a fine gentleman whose name they had known from their childhood—a sight not possible every day, and thus well worth the effort attendant on securing a good place. The windows and balconies were also crowded — with a company more select, perhaps, than that below, but at the same time more cruel. Men who had been Ostenburg's friends, women who had danced and flirted with him, all were eager to witness his degradation and to mock at his fall, anxious perhaps at the same time to show their devotion to the Elector—a devotion somewhat obscured during the French rule. Be this as it may, Ostenburg won hardly a compassionate word, save from one or two of his comrades on duty below ; he was ruthlessly condemned, his cowardice marvelled at and despised ; people discussed the truth of that affair with Madame Duclos, criticised her beauty, and gave a passing sigh to her sad death. The defence at the court-martial had been that the Freiherr was hardly accountable for

his actions. What had caused such temporary insanity? What had changed him so utterly? Was it true that he had believed Duclos dead, and that the sight of him at the head of his regiment had unhinged his mind? Assuredly there was a woman at the back of everything!

It was a frosty November morning; the sky was clear and pale, and white mist-wreaths still clung to the ground and to the river, though the pale sun glanced merrily enough on the accoutrements of the soldiers in the square. Sounds which rang out clearly—the murmur of voices, the pawing of hoofs, the clatter of arms—gave significance to the expectancy which filled the air, but it hardly seemed that a tragedy was to be enacted—the morning was too bright for that! Nature does not always arrange her effects to suit the sensations of man; rather she delights in using the irony of contrast, and laughs the more gaily for his bitterness.

Presently Veronika appeared at a window on the north side of the square, the side to which Ostenburg's face would be turned. She was accompanied only by a maid, and her dark pelisse and small fur cap were not in the least conspicuous, but she was at once recognised and her appearance commented on. Some said she was heartless to witness the degradation of her friend; others whispered that her presence betokened a too deep interest in the Freiherr; others again discovered that she was very pale. She herself took heed of no one; her thoughts were on the terrible scene to come, on the awful agony that Heinz must endure, on Egon's set face at the head of the regiment which had so often followed its Colonel to victory.

At last the distant roll of muffled drums struck upon

the air—a dismal and impressive prelude to what should follow. A hush fell, and through the silence of expectancy sounded the tramp of measured footsteps, coming ever nearer and nearer. Presently the troops in one corner of the square opened and made a lane. Hisses and derision began to mingle with the mournful music of the drums; a few little ragged boys slipped through the line of soldiers and hooted until they were driven back into the crowd. Slowly the procession defiled into the square: first the drummers, rolling out their dirge, then an escort of cavalry, and last of all the guard, with Ostenburg in their midst, wearing for the last time the full-dress uniform of a Colonel of Hussars, his sword by his side and his decorations on his breast. His face was white and set, and it seemed that those glances, of which the pity was as cruel as the contempt, would kill him; yet he walked firmly and people murmured that never in happier days had Heinz von Ostenburg looked so disdainful,—a few women added, never so handsome.

They reached the centre of the square and for an instant the prisoner raised his eyes. Veronika leaned forward, and the compassion of her face gave him courage to endure: looking at that face he could forget the rest.

The guard fell back, and as he stood alone a sudden revulsion of pity swept over those who watched: it seemed so cruel that he must bear this indignity! When the sentence was read there was hardly a dry eye among the spectators, and one or two ladies turned away, shuddering and saying they could watch no more. Heinz heard no word of the reading; he was strung to a pitch of suffering which seals the ears and blinds the eyes; to endure calmly—that was what he

strove for, to keep his limbs from trembling, his brain from giving way. The sentence mattered little, but it mattered much that he, an Ostenburg, stood shamed before the world.

An officer approached, and he saw as in a dream that it was Egon; the two comrades looked into each other's eyes and took a silent farewell—but Pustau's were the dimmer of the two. One by one he cut off Ostenburg's decorations and laid them on a cushion which a soldier held in readiness; then the epaulets; then the other insignia of his rank. All the time the muffled drums rolled out their requiem to honour. Lastly he unbuckled the sword, drew it from the sheath, and laid it across his knee. Heinz noted idly how the pale sunlight caught the blade and turned it to a line of dazzling brilliance; for years afterwards that play of the sunshine haunted his eyes, even as the awful snap of the breaking steel rang in his ears. The fragments of the sword were flung at his feet and, with a final roll of drums and a blare of trumpets, the ceremony ended. He looked up at Veronika and thanked her with a smile.

The crowd melted away, the troops began to defile, and Ostenburg was led to the chaise in which, still closely guarded, he was to be driven to his estate. He hid himself in the farthest corner with a sigh of relief; he had endured the worst; the strain which he had put upon himself to keep calm gave way at last, and he was so utterly exhausted that he fell asleep.

They arrived at Ostenburg in the afternoon; at the entrance to the avenue the commander of the escort signified that his duty was at an end. Heinz started and gazed blankly, then, recollecting what had happened, thanked the officer for the courtesy he had

shown him, and begged that he and his men would consider themselves his guests at the village inn. He could not endure to ask them to the house.

They rode off. Heinz got out of the chaise and discharged it ; he stood exhausted, leaning against one of the great beech-trunks, while the clatter of the horses' feet and the roll of wheels grew gradually fainter and fainter. When they had altogether died away the silence all around terrified him. He looked up and saw how the greyness of November had crept over the clear beauty of the morning ; not a breath stirred ; through the stillness he could hear distinctly the fall of withered leaves. It was one of those days which scarcely seem real ; a veil had been drawn over the splendour of the brown and golden trees ; tender grey and white mottled the sky above. The world was inexpressibly quiet and desolate.

In a sort of panic at the desolation, Heinz moved into the centre of the avenue and stumbled on towards the house. When he came to it he dared not look up, lest the reproach of its aspect should be more than he could bear. He crept up the broad steps shamefacedly, and paused for a moment, catching at the balustrade for support. At last he gathered strength to knock, then started at the loud echo of the sound. There was a long pause, but presently he heard steps and the drawing of bolts and bars. The door was flung back ; in the dimness of the hall he was aware of a line of servants, with Veit at the head. He hurried through with a shudder and went into his study. Was this his home ? This ? This home-coming was the worst of all — he, the coward, was not master here ! He must be ashamed before the eyes of his own servants.

They brought him dinner in the great dining-room,

but the accustomed ceremony choked him, and the shield on the gorgeous plate gave him a deeper sense of guilt. He had stained, disgraced it ! The portraits on the wall gazed down at him with reproach, mirrored, he fancied, in the insolent stare of the footmen. He might not reprove their insolence, their curiosity. Could he bear it every day ? Must he face the scorn of underlings all his life ? No ! He would be alone ; it would be best so !

The dinner dragged through its weary courses and, at last, when dessert was set on the table, they left him. He leaned forward on his elbows and hid his face with a groan, thinking of those many scornful eyes in the Friedrichsplatz, of what his friends and neighbours must be saying of him. It was the awful loneliness that hurt him, the loneliness that must be his all his life. He longed to go to his mother and just lean his head against her knee and be forgiven — just feel her strong, cool hands on his aching brow.

Presently he rose and went to his study. He took down a book and tried to read, but the letters swam before his eyes. Then there was a knock at the door and the butler entered ; he asked for his dismissal very curtly and with scarcely veiled contempt. When he was gone the other servants followed one by one with the same request. Heinz understood ; he had intended to discharge them, but it was they who would not serve a dishonoured master. He knit his brow and gave the order that all should leave that very night ; he could endure them about him no longer.

At last Veit came. Ostenburg had seen the man already, but had been ashamed to address his old playmate lest in his face also he should read contempt. If he had looked he would have seen that the dog-like devotion in the servant's eyes was unchanged.

"What is it you want?" he asked impatiently. "You go, too, I suppose?"

"Dear master," said Veit; "I will not leave you! How can you think that of me? The rest — they are faithless fellows! But I—I love you, Herr; do not drive me away! We were boys together; I have served you all my life—let me serve you till death!"

Ostenburg listened in wonder.

"Do you mean this, Veit?" he asked slowly, almost incredulously.

"Do I mean it, Herr!" cried the servant.

Ostenburg's face softened; such devotion was very sweet to one who had met only contempt for so many weeks.

"Veit, thank you, but you had better go," he said at last, brokenly. "I cannot accept your sacrifice."

"It is no sacrifice, Herr Freiherr! I would have come to you before, but they would not let me. I tried to obtain admittance, too,"—he hesitated,— "to the prison, but they refused to admit me, so I waited till you should come home. I will never leave you, Herr Freiherr!"

"Do you know what it means to serve a dishonoured and disgraced master?" asked Ostenburg, wondering that he could inspire such fidelity. "You will share in some of the disgrace, perhaps. Your friends will scoff at you."

"What do I care for friends? I am your servant, Herr. Let me stay!"

"But think how lonely you will be! No one will come near us."

"You shall at least have me with you! I will care for you; I will do all I can. You cannot live quite alone. Do not send me away, Herr!"

Heinz held out his hand, saying :

“ Even in misfortune, one friend left ! Veit, you ’re the only one, except the Gräfin von Pustau. Stay then, if you will, and thank you ! ”

“ No, I thank you, Herr ! ” said Veit, kissing his master’s hand. “ I could n’t leave you ! ”

“ Then you don’t altogether despise me ? ” asked Ostenburg, looking into the man’s honest eyes.

“ Despise you, Herr ? God knows you would not do wrong willingly ! It was a misfortune. Only false friends desert one whom they love when he is unhappy.”

The man’s devotion touched Heinz and, feeling less utterly deserted, he dismissed him, bidding him see that the rest departed. Half an hour later a note came from Veronika. Heinz tore it open and hastily read the brief contents :

I promised you the truth. Your mother is very ill. She cannot live many hours. She does not speak of you, but if you could come I think her hardness might give way. Risk all to do so at once.

VERONIKA.

Ostenburg called Veit.

“ You have promised to serve me,” he said. “ Get me a peasant’s dress and prepare the stable cart. You and I must go to Pustau immediately. The Frau Freifrau is dying. I must not be recognised or they might stop me.”

“ But, dear master, it ’s death if you are discovered,” pleaded Veit. “ Consider the risk ! ”

“ Is life of such value to me that I should fear death ? I must see her ! No one will recognise me—and I can trust you.”

Veit bent his head and yielded. He knew Heim too well, and the habit of years was too strong to disobey. An hour later two peasants drove off in a light cart towards the highroad.

CHAPTER XXXV

FORGIVEN

FRAU VON OSTENBURG sat propped up with cushions in a great armchair. She had refused to remain in bed even though she knew that her last hour was near, and all through the long day she had stayed there, using all her strength to appear calm and unconcerned, even while her spirit had endured the agony of that scene in the Friedrichsplatz as keenly as if she had been present. Veronika tended her as a daughter might have done, waiting upon her every wish and watching anxiously for the moment when she might dare to plead for the son who had so grievously offended. Hour by hour she saw how the lines of suffering deepened in the stern old face, and she could not but admire the power of endurance in the enfeebled frame. It seemed like desecration for a stranger to invade the privacy of that unbending soul, and yet for the sake of Heinz it must be done.

Veronika had been called away for a few moments; when she returned there was a strange light in her eyes, and her hands quivered as she kneeled beside the old lady.

"*Gnädige Frau*, I am come to ask you for something," she said.

"What can I give you?" murmured the Freifrau in a low, toneless voice.

" I want you to forgive."

" Surely one who has earned all my gratitude need not ask forgiveness !"

" I do not ask it for myself but for one who has sinned against you and against honour," continued Veronika firmly, though her heart beat fast and she grew almost afraid before that stern glance.

The Freifrau's brow clouded, and she drew back her hand.

" For such there is no forgiveness," she said.

But Veronika pleaded with voice and eyes :

" It is your own son, *gnädige Frau* !"

The answer came quick and sharp, so that it cut like a knife to the heart of a man standing in the shadow outside the door :

" I have no son !"

" Mercy is greater than justice," urged the younger woman.

" Some sins are beyond mercy, and mercy is too often used as a cloak for weakness."

There was no weakness in that rigid face, but Veronika besought pity once more.

" And yet he repents. Is his sin so awful ? He has at least suffered enough for it ! He indeed threw away honour for the sake of a woman ; but he repents, and resolves to live out his repentance, enduring his punishment bravely. Freifrau, be merciful ! Do not harden his heart by your sternness !"

" If another spoke of him, Veronika, I should not listen. You mean well, but I must ask you to leave the subject. He is no more my son, nor do his resolutions concern me !"

A sob shook the frame of the man outside the door.

"If he kneeled at your feet now would you speak so?" asked Veronika.

"If he kneeled at my feet I should not acknowledge one who has dishonoured an honourable name and stained an ancient shield. But it is impossible. He is imprisoned on his estate, and a coward would not risk the pain of death by breaking through his imprisonment."

Veronika looked imploringly into the set face.

"The coward has risked his life to ask your forgiveness, Freifrau. He is here. You will not refuse to see him!"

The old lady drew herself away from Veronika with blazing eyes. The knowledge that Heinz was so near shook her, but she spoke only the more bitterly:

"You go beyond the liberty I have allowed you, Frau Gräfin. I will not see the Freiherr von Ostenburg, nor speak with him, and I cannot see what cause you have to interfere between him and me."

"Only the cause of mercy," said Veronika gently. "He repents; he is broken-hearted."

"How can you know that?"

"I went to him in prison, *gnädige Frau*. He told me all, and he spoke so that I must needs believe him."

"You have strange ideas of the duty of a noblewoman. For the last time, I desire that you will speak of this no more."

Veronika rose and clasped her hands.

"He is your only son," she said slowly. "I think that whatever wrong Heinzchen might do, I could not deny him the refuge of my heart—his mother's heart."

For an instant it seemed that the Freifrau hesitated,—her love was at war with her pride,—but at last the voice came strong and unyielding:

“ Perhaps a peasant woman might forgive, Veronika, but we of the nobility have more to consider than our feelings ! ”

Veronika thought of the man behind the door, and she would not be silenced.

“ Freifrau, be merciful ! ” she pleaded again. “ I ask mercy for your only son ! ”

“ I have no son,” the old lady repeated, tightening the grip of her quivering fingers on the arm of her chair.

But the man outside could bear no more ; he flung back the door and rushed forward, falling on his knees before the Freifrau. With a supreme effort she raised herself and stood erect and proud before him.

“ Go ! ” she cried in a loud voice. “ For your crime there is no forgiveness ! ”

He lifted his hands towards her, crying:

“ Mother, Mother, have pity ! ”

For an instant she stood without moving, then she tottered and seemed about to fall. Heinz sprang up and caught her swaying form in his arms ; her eyes were shut, but suddenly she opened them and looked at him with a radiant smile. Painfully her lips framed the words :

“ My son ! ”

The light passed from her lips to her eyes, then faded, and left the face grey. Heinz lifted her to the bed, and Veronika held cordials to her mouth, but the Freifrau's heart was still.

Ostenburg stood motionless beside the bed, with a new light in his face. Veronika watched him, not daring to speak or to put herself between the mother and son ; her part was done, her task accomplished.

Presently he bent down and kissed the dead woman's brow.

“Forgiven !” he whispered. “Yes, Mother, I will be worthy of your forgiveness.”

Then he turned to Veronika and took her hands in his.

“And to you, good-bye also,” he said. “Even if I never see you again, I shall always remember that you came to me and raised me from the dust, that you did for me that which no other man or woman could have done. Thank you, Veronika ! If you had what you deserve there would be no cloud over your life at any time. God bless you !”

“I have only done what each of us owes the other,” she said simply. “If I have helped you, thank God for that ! Be a brave and a good man from henceforth. But this is not farewell for ever. It will be possible, I trust, for me to see you sometimes.”

“I dare not hope that,” he murmured. “But think of me sometimes ; speak of me with pity to Egon !” And, glancing once more at the bed, he went out alone to face his life.

Veronika sat there long in silence until, hearing Egon’s step below, she hastened down to meet him.

EPILOGUE

AFTER THIRTY YEARS

IT was a warm summer evening ; the long shadows fell lazily across the golden grass, the air was heavy with the scent of flowers, a few white clouds floated on a dazzling sky. A group of eight people were gathered together on the terrace at Pustau ; and though they talked and laughed merrily enough, there seemed something of anxiety or expectation among them, and glances were frequently directed towards the drive or across the field, especially by the two ladies who formed the centre of the group.

“ Those children ought really to be home by now,” observed the elder, who was still very handsome, with her thick white hair simply parted above the smooth brow.

“ I don’t believe, Mother, you were ever as anxious over me as you are over that little scamp Egon,” laughed a tall, red-haired man who sat beside her.

“ But if they should be lost ! ” said the younger lady, shading her eyes and looking in the direction of the avenue.

Herr von Pustau patted his daughter-in-law’s shoulder consolingly. He was a strong, vigorous old man of seventy, with a kindly light shining in his eyes.

“ If they are they will find the way back,” he said. “ You really need not be afraid, Marie ! ”

A peal of laughter rang from the other end of the terrace, where Fritz von Pustau, the younger son of the Graf and Gräfin, was playing with his two little nieces. The others turned to watch, and smiled complacently.

"Karoline! Mariechen! do not torment your uncle!" admonished their mother.

One of the little girls raised a flushed and merry face.

"Oh, but he likes it," she said. "Don't you, Uncle Fritz?"

"Immensely," he assured her, gravely, and began the game anew.

"I shall just go down the avenue and see if those boys are anywhere near," said a man who had not yet spoken. He was Ludwig von Ostenburg, the husband of Veronika's only daughter—a grave man, saddened by the loss of his wife, who had died only a year or two after their marriage.

He rose and walked along the terrace, but before he reached the end a sound of hoofs was heard, and two small boys galloped up on their ponies, flung off breathlessly, and scampered up the steps with eager penitence. They were fine-looking children of some nine years old, one dark and grey-eyed, the other with red-gold curls that gleamed in the sunlight. He of the dark hair flew to his father, Herr von Ostenburg, while the other was caught and kissed by the younger Frau von Pustau.

"Egon! Fritz! what have you been doing?" was uttered in a tone of reproach.

"It was naughty to be so late on my birthday," said Veronika, drawing the dark-haired boy to her.

"It was not our fault—exactly," began he penitently. "You see, Grandmother, we lost our way."

"And how was that, Egon?" she asked. "Surely you know all the country about here?"

"Not beyond the village, Grandmother. And—and—we went through the gate you told us not to."

"Well—and then?" asked Herr von Pustau.

"Then," Fritz broke in, "we came to a wood, and we rode through it a long way, and then across a field and into another wood; and there were two paths, and we did n't know which to take, and we saw that it was getting late, and Egon said——"

"Never mind what I said," interrupted Egon impatiently. "We must tell about the man."

"What sort of man?" asked Veronika, who had often sifted the grain from the chaff in the confused narratives of childhood.

Egon looked puzzled.

"I don't quite know what sort of a man," said he, "because he was dressed like a peasant. But he did n't look like a peasant, somehow, and his hands were long and thin like father's."

"He looked," said Fritz, with a sudden awe in his face—"he looked like the King must look, I think."

Veronika drew a quick breath and glanced with meaning at her husband.

"Can you describe him?" she asked eagerly of the child. "Was he old?"

"Very old," said Egon; "older, I should think, than Grandfather. But he was n't bald like Grandfather—his hair was white and very thick and rather long. He was taller than Grandfather, too, and thinner. The strangest thing about him was his eyes; they seemed to look one through and through."

"No," said Fritz; "the strangest thing was that

sometimes, when Egon's grave, he looks like that man. Is n't it funny?"

"It was he, then," murmured Veronika, half to herself. "I've seen that look in the boy."

Ludwig von Ostenburg leaned forward eagerly.

"Do you mean—?" he asked. "What an unfortunate meeting for the boys!"

Veronika laid her hand on his arm.

"No, not that," she said. "It was all so long ago—it could n't harm them. I have seen him since those days. Let us hear their story, Ludwig. Well, Egon, what more? You met this man after you had lost your way?"

"Yes, Grandmother. And we were frightened at first, because you know they told us—the servants—that a wicked man lived beyond that gate, and that he would hurt us if we went through."

"But he did n't look wicked at all," put in Fritz. "Only grave and rather sad; so we stopped and dismounted, and Egon took off his cap and asked if he would tell us the way back to Pustau."

Egon took up the tale:

"Yes; but he did n't answer directly, and only looked at me a long while and said, 'Is your name Pustau, my child?' I said, 'No, Herr, I am Egon von Ostenburg, but this is my cousin, Fritz von Pustau.' He looked at us both, and sighed; then he asked us whether we were both the grandchildren of the Graf and Gräfin von Pustau, and I told him we were. He bent his head, and began knocking down the daisies that grew by the path with a big stick he carried, as if he were thinking—so I did not like to interrupt him. At last he looked up and said: 'I will show you the way. Come!' We led our ponies

and he walked between us, and as we went he asked us a great many questions. Presently another man met us, and the first one stopped and talked to him. He called him 'Veit,' and the other said 'Herr Freiherr.' Then he went on, and I noticed how smooth the path was, and how there were beautiful plants and queer trees on either side. He saw that I looked, and said: 'My boy, that old man and I planted all this that you see and made the path.' Then he sighed again, and said something that I did not understand about Nature, and being healed. I don't know what he meant. I told him a lot of things, but he seemed to know a great deal about us all. I said that I lived with you, Grandmother, because I had no mother, and Fritz told him about his sisters and about everybody, and he listened very attentively. At last he said: 'I know your grandmother, and she is the best friend I ever had. I knew her many years ago — when your father, Fritz, was almost a baby, and before your mother was born, Egon!' And he told me I was to love and honour you always because you were the most splendid woman in all the world — and so you are," the child added loyally.

Veronika's eyes were full of tears and her husband had hidden his face with his hand. The younger members of the family listened with the hushed awe with which one hears of some long-past tragedy in which those one loves have taken part.

"Did he say any more?" asked Veronika at last, in a low voice.

"When we came into the wood-path near the village he stopped, and took me by the shoulders and looked at me steadily. 'You are the heir to a very noble name,' he said. 'Be always brave and honourable and

true ! 'There was a man once who forgot what he owed that name, and he has had to bear the punishment through many long years. Perhaps you will hear his story some day—you are too young to understand it now. I am glad, very glad, to have seen you, and I am glad, very glad, that Veronika von Pustau's grandson shall be the Freiherr von Ostenburg !' Then he took out his pocketbook and tore out a leaf and wrote on it. 'Give this to your grandmother,' he said. 'It's a birthday greeting.' I had told him it was your birthday to-day, you know. 'Whom shall I say it's from?' I asked him. But he said you would know, and perhaps you would tell me his name. And he looked up at the sky and said, 'Thank God, the end has nearly come !' I don't know what he meant by that, either. So we thanked him and I kissed his hand, because I knew he was n't a peasant in spite of his clothes. And we rode off, but when we looked back he was standing there still with his face our way."

"And you have brought me his message?" Veronika asked.

Egon fumbled in his pocket and drew out a crumpled piece of paper. Frau von Pustau took it and scanned the writing upon it. Then she rose, and calling her husband walked with him to the end of the terrace. He read the paper which she put into his hands ; it ran :

I have tried to expiate my crime and to do my duty ; in so doing I have found peace. I think of you often, and of your goodness to me all through these terrible years. Your visits have given me life. I would not have dared ask to see the boy, but chance has been good to me. He is a gallant child ; bred by you he will be a good man and worthy of the name he bears. The end is very near. I have never forgotten her—you said I

need not forget. I love her with a great love—a better love now—and sometimes I dare to hope that we are not parted for ever. If this is the last time—good-bye, Veronika.

HEINZ.

“Poor Heinz! poor Heinz!” murmured Egon brokenly. “What does he not owe to you, dearest?”

Veronika took his arm and pressed it with a tenderness that spoke of long years of unbroken confidence. How different had their life been from that of the lonely man at Ostenburg—peaceful even in its afflictions, flowing calmly on as a great river!

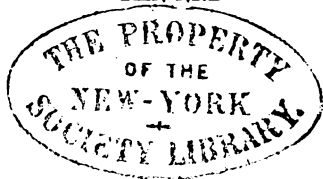
Little Egon ran up to them and slipped his hand into that of his grandmother.

“You have n’t told me yet who the man was,” he said gravely.

Veronika paused and looked into the child’s eyes, which, questioning, had that strange likeness in them; then she spoke slowly:

“He was one of your name who sinned very deeply. Some day, when you are old enough to understand, you shall hear the story. But when you do, remember that he suffered very deeply also, and paid for his sin with many years of loneliness and sorrow.”

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